

Haibane Ranma

by Xilore

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Summary: Nearly a week after Rakka hatched and things were going into their routines, two more cocoons appear in Old Home. One of these two newborns still has a few memories of the past! Chapter 9 version 1.0
Up!

1. Welcome to Old Home

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"..." speech

Thoughts

This is my first post, so please feel free to send comments. I had noticed that there were few stories here, so I felt it would be nice to cross these two very different Anime together. That and with the titles of the Anime, how could I resist this mix? b

****Haibane Ranma****

The excitement was becoming too much for them, as they gathered in the courtyard of Old Home. It was quite a congregation. Nearly all of them young girls, no more than maybe eighteen, with a few younger children, and on woman who by appearance could be considered either the leader, or perhaps the landlady. The greatest difference between her and the others present though, was not her age. She was the only one there lacking a halo and a set of wings.

"It's been so long since it first appeared, I can't believe it has taken so long," one of the girls said, breaking a long silence. "Do they all take so much time?"

"I don't know, Rakka, remember you only arrived two weeks ago, and we didn't know yours was there until an hour or two before you hatched." This voice came from a younger girl than the first. This girl was dressed in a white shirt with green sleeves and a pair of blue shorts. She had blonde hair cut neatly above her shoulders, squarely framing her face. She looked to be about 12 years old. By far, she was the most energetic of the crowd, bouncing around happily, as though without care. "Think this one will join with the Young Feathers? It is a lot smaller than yours was, Rakka."

The girl, Rakka, was a bit more mature in appearance than the bouncy one, with light brown hair that seemed hard to control. She wore a clean, sailor-style dress with cream colored orange trim and neckerchief.

"It does look pretty small, Kuu. Mine felt very large from the inside."

Rakka looked around the courtyard. It was a nice place, Old Home. The courtyard was about as large as most houses, and was paved with cobblestone. As befitting the name, the plastered walls of the buildings were cracked with age, and here and there a chunk of the white-wash was missing altogether. In the southwestern area of the property was an old clock tower. The clock didn't work, but the whole seen gave off the appearance that Old Home was once a small college campus, though no one alive knew for sure what it once was. Now though, it was once again occupied. The main exit from the courtyard to the street lay in the southeast corner. There stood a table and a corkboard for announcements with many papers tacked to it. Beside the board was a long set of hooks with many name tags hanging from them. The focus of all the excitement, however, stood next to the large fountain at the center of the courtyard.

Resting next to the currently dry fountain was a cocoon about four feet tall, and nearly the same in diameter. The cocoon was rooted in the cobblestone, the roots wrapping up to about the middle as if it were an eyeball looking up to the sky. The cocoon itself had turned charcoal grey.

"Well, it won't be long now. Look, its getting hard and looks ready to break at any time." This came from a girl with a very serious look on her face. Her black hair hung loosely just past her shoulders and framed her face in the front. The cigarette in her mouth wiggled as she spoke.

Crack!

All went quiet and the attentions of everyone present quickly moved to the source of the slight sound - a small fracture appearing on the shell of the cocoon. Everyone looked expectantly for the inevitable pouring of liquid from the cocoon. When none came, Rakka and Kuu stepped forward curiously. The uncommon had always brought out the curiosity in these two.

His head swam as he tried to regain his bearings. _'So much pain...' _he thought. _'What the hell hit me? I'm not sure, but I think this

is a common thing in my life' _As his world slowly stopped spinning, the young man gazed about him. He was in a large field with softly rolling hills. A horse pranced about gaily, not too far from him on one of the hilltops. The horse was stallion, and paint horse, brown and white, and moved about gracefully, but with a wildness that showed he'd never been nor would be tamed. It was hypnotic, the way this stallion moved. It was almost as though it was a well rehearsed dance. After watching the horse for what seemed like hours, the scenery faded and vanished. Across the young man's eyes flashed many images, so suddenly he was startled. A large house... a room where people fought... images of people too. Three girls, one with a long ponytail and a gentle face, one with a page-boy haircut who looked both bored and thoughtful, and one with a short bob, scowling at him. Many more places and people flashed before his eyes, faster and faster until his vision went white. He closed his eyes and shook his head to try to regain his senses and banish the light from invading his senses too much. When he reopened his eyes, he found himself facing a grey-green wall.

_ 'What the...? Where am I now? What is this place?'_ Thought the boy. He was curled up and floating within an odorless clear liquid. All around him he could see only the grey-green walls. He strained his ears and could hear muffled voices coming from the other side of his prison. It sounded like a large group of people. The fact that he was completely submerged, yet still able to breathe, either didn't concern him, or it just hadn't registered in his head. Seeing no point in staying within his confines, he moved his hand to check the walls and found them hard, but seemingly brittle.

_ 'Hmm...'_ he thought as he pressed against it. _'It cracked a bit. I think with a good, hard push I can get out of here.'_ He pushed again and fractured his cage a little more. Pulling his right fist back as much as his confines could allow, he thrust his arm forward and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch as a chunk of the wall flew out. Unfortunately, this combination of the sudden bright light, the rush of liquid pouring out, and his position proved too much and threw him off-balance. He crumpled out of the cocoon, exhausted. Striking his head against some rough stones below him one though shot through his head before sweet unconsciousness took him. _'Why me?'_

Crack Crack! Fwoom!

Fracturing even more, Kuu and Rakka stepped back from the cocoon just before a small chunk of it shattered outward, nearly hitting them. That side of the cocoon crumbled away as the weight of a boy fell through it and onto the cobblestones below. The boy struck hard on his head and fell instantly into unconsciousness.

The gathering was shocked for certain to see a young man fall out of the cocoon of his apparent age. By the looks of it, he seemed about seventeen years old, and well toned. His hair was black, and very unruly, though the dampness of it from the cocoon gave it some semblance of control. It was thick hair, and fell to his shoulder blades. A damp robe done up in the back was worn by him. Gathering him up, four of the girls started to carry him indoors before one of the little boys they referred to as Young Feathers ran up to them.

"There's another one! It's on the other side of the building over

there!" The boy shouted. He pointed to the dorm to the north side of Old Home.

"We'll get the second one later," the girl with the cigarette said annoyed. "We have to get this on inside since he's hatched already."

"This one has already hatched too! She is lying on the ground!" The cigarette fell from the girl's mouth. "What should we do, Reki?"

Reki thought fast. "Nemuu, Hikari, you and Kuu get the boy. Rakka and I will go get the girl. Kana, go ahead of us and prepare the guest room for two."

Hearing positive responses from the others, Reki and Rakka followed the Young Feather named Shorta to the second cocoon.

"Ooookaay... How am I going to prepare a room with one bed for both a boy and a girl to sleep in?" Kana stood looking frustrated at the single bed. She wore a dark green shirt. The color was fading, and there was a little fraying at the cuffs of the sleeves, showing that the shirt had seen many days. It was in a style that resembled a Chinese shirt. She also wore a pair of casual dark slacks, also showing signs of wear.

"Its strange enough that a boy would hatch here anyway," Kana sighed. "I guess I can get the cot from the unused room next door." With that, Kana left to grab and setup a cot in the guest room.

Not long after she left, the door opened again, allowing a sleepy-eyed Nemuu, a sharp looking Hikari, and Kuu, all carrying the new boy into the room. Nemuu wore a light brown sweater and darker skirt that reached her ankles. Hikari wore a nice white blouse and knee length skirt that wouldn't look out of place in an office setting. Her hair was in a ponytail set high on the back of her head. Seeing only the one bed prepared, they carefully laid him down in it and pulled the covers up. The door opened again to reveal Rakka, Reki and Shorta helping to carry a girl about the same apparent age as the boy into the room.

"Where is Kana? I don't have a place to put this girl yet and my arms are really starting to ache." Reki sighed with an underlying annoyance.

As if on cue, Kana returned with a bundle of wood and linen. At the glare from Reki, she moved more earnestly to the far side of the room from the bed and setup the cot. Rakka sighed too.

"Sorry guys, it was harder than I thought it would be to get the cot loose from the clutter next door," said Kana as she finished setting up the makeshift bed. Covering the lightly robed girl with a blanket, Kana turned back to the others and sat down hard into a chair. "So, how are we going to do this? We've never had two at a time before. What if their wings come in at the same time too?"

"What about the Halo Mold? The Haibane Renmei only has one that we know of," added Hikari.

"People! People!" Calmly called Reki aloud. "What is important now is

to make sure everything is done for them. This is a new situation for all of us, and we need to be calm. Let's pull together and divide up the tasks. Kuu, I need you and Rakka to watch over these two. Nemuu, please prepare for when they awaken by gathering some snacks and make sure the first-aid kit is properly stocked. We want to be sure they will have what they need in case their wings break before we return. Hikari and Kana will go to the Temple to get the Halo Mold. Don't forget we need two."

"What are you going to do, Reki," asked the soft-spoken Nemuu.

"I need to go into town to see if we can get a real bed for the girl. It isn't as urgent as the other tasks, so if I can get one I'll be back to get some help bringing it here."

"Okay, Reki, we'll see you when you get back," Rakka assured the older girl.

"Yeah! You can count on us to take good care of them!" Kuu piped in.

With the other Haibane gone, Kuu and Rakka each took a chair and picked a person to watch over. Kuu sat excitedly, rocking in her chair as she watched over the boy. Rakka rested nervously on her seat beside the sleeping girl. The girl was pretty, about the same age as the boy, maybe a little older. Her chocolate brown hair shown silky smooth and still wet from the cocoon while Rakka used a nearby towel to dry it. _'Wow,'_ thought Rakka, _'she is very pretty. And older than me. Her hair is very soft. I wonder if it was like this for Reki when she took care of me right after I hatched. I remember that she spent a lot of time cleaning my wings when they broke. I wonder just how much time that took.'_

After more than an hour of reminiscing about the past, the girl stirred before her. Seeing as the others had not yet returned, Rakka started to feel a bit panicky. _'Oh my goodness! What do I do? What do I say!'_ Looking to her experience from when she had hatched, she calmed herself down and began to speak to the new girl.

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

"Ughh... I feel terrible, like my head will explode if I talk too loud."

"I see. You hit your head when you came out of the cocoon. Reki and I found you on the ground in the northern garden of Old Home."

"Old Home? Cocoon? What are you talking about," the girl said drowsily. She looked up at Rakka with bleary eyes. "Who are you, and who is Reki?" Her eyes cleared up fast as she got a good look at Rakka. "What are you!" Poor Rakka was being pummeled with questions, the last one with a voice near shrieking. _'I really hope the others get back soon!'_ Rakka's fingers began to fidget nervously. About to explain, she opened her mouth but was relieved when Kuu provided a welcome distraction.

"Hey Rakka! I think the new girl woke up the new boy!"

"Oh good! Um, can the new boy walk?"

"Lemme ask," Kuu replied.

"So, wait, I'm not the only 'new kid' on this block?" the new girl asked.

"No, actually," Rakka answered, feeling a little more relieved, "We found the new boy's cocoon about a week ago, but we didn't even know about your cocoon until after you had already hatched."

"What do you mean, 'hatched'? And you could call me by my name you know, it's..." the new girl trailed off, confused. "My name is... wha? What is my name? I don't remember it..."

"No one does. No one remembers you, and you don't remember any of your past. It's normal. As for you being hatched, that is how all the Haibane are born," Rakka said cheerfully, wondering how the new girl would react.

"Well, what am I going to be called then? I can't keep being called 'the new girl' all the time."

"Well," Rakka started, a trace of nervousness returning to her voice, "it is tradition among the Haibane to be named according to the dream we had while in the cocoon. My name is Rakka, which means 'falling', because in my cocoon dream I was falling through the sky. The girl over there is Kuu. In her cocoon dream she was floating through the air, so she was named Kuu because Kuu means 'air'."

"Aaahhh, they're awake," Reki said as she entered the room. "How are they doing?"

"Hey Reki! I'm glad you are back! The new girl has a lot of questions," Kuu said with her never-ending excitement. "The new boy though is getting really hot!"

"Oh no! Has Nemuu returned with the first-aid kit?"

"Not yet, Reki," Rakka supplied. "She should be ba-"

The door slammed open, interrupting her as Nemuu rushed in with the first-aid kit, two brushes, and two empty washbasins. Without saying anything, she dropped her armful on the large table in the middle of the room and tossed the first-aid kit to Reki.

Had it not been for the sudden wordless yell of pain from the new boy, Reki would have caught it without a problem. Instead, her finger caught on the latch, opening the kit in mid-air and spilling the contents all over the floor. Cursing her luck mentally, she stooped down to grab a roll of medical tape. Reki dashed over to the boy's bedside and checked his back.

"Reki!" Rakka called out, starting to panic again.

Having seen the lumps on the boy's back swelling almost to bursting, she shot a glance to Rakka and Nemuu. "This one is ready to break too, Reki," Nemuu said, seemingly unconcerned. "I think we'll need to split this up." The new girl let out a shriek of pain.

Wrapping several layers of medical tape around her thumb, Reki tossed the remaining roll to Nemuu. "Here, your turn."

Nemuu caught the tape and wrapped her thumb as well, knowing exactly what Reki was meaning for her to do with it. _'Well, first time for everything. I don't know how much to use, but better safe than sorry. It wouldn't do to go back to work with one less finger to use.'_ Satisfied with the amount of protection on her thumb, she moved to the new girl.

"Here, bite on this, so you don't bite your tongue."

"Here! Bite on this, so you don't bite your tongue!" Reki and Nemuu said at the same time to their respective patients; Reki to the boy and Nemuu the girl. The boy, though not very vocal about his pain, bit down hard on Reki's bandaged thumb. The new girl's bite caused Nemuu to yelp.

Reki looked again to the boy's back. The lumps were swollen larger than she had seen before, and the wing tips had broken through. Reki watched in morbid fascination as the wings began their exodus out of his body, covered with thick layers of blood and grease. Fascination turned frozen into shock as the wings continued growing, and extended out of his back far beyond the normal forearm length that is usual among the Haibane. More and more it grew, until finally the folded wings snapped open, fully extended to a length that almost matched the boy's height. The snapping motion knocked Kuu and several items from the table onto the floor. The boy and girl both shrieked in pain in the early evening as the sun set. The four Haibane present also shrieked, not in anguish or pain, but in combined shock and fear.

Dawn came slowly the next day. The entire night had been a tiring affair for the Haibane of Old Home. Surrounding the new boy was Rakka, Hikari, Kuu, Nemuu and Kana. All were busy brushing and cleaning the boy's very large wings. Their fright had nearly been abated, but every time they looked toward Reki, their smiles slipped and nervousness came again into the room.

Reki sat with the new girl, gently brushing the very last of the grease and blood from her wings. It seemed as though her past had returned to haunt her some more, and she worked silently, her mind a great tempest of thoughts unbidden, and unwelcome. Reki chanced a glance at the new boy's wings. They also were nearly cleaned, having had the other five girls all working on them. The wings shone a fine, glossy charcoal grey color in the sunlight. The sheer size of them still amazed them all.

Reki sighed to herself as she went back to cleaning the girl's wings. While normal in size, the caused great fear in those who had seen them so far. Instead of the beautiful grey that many of the Haibane had enjoyed, this girl's wings were a shiny, raven black.

"Ugh... what's going on? Where am I?" The boy had finally stirred. As her charge was still sleeping, Reki moved to the boy, having just finished cleaning the girl's wings.

"You are in Old Home, a nest of the Haibane," Reki said.

"Old Home... I don't know any place named that."

_ I guess he wasn't really awake when Rakka was explaining to the

girl,'_ Reki thought to herself. "No one really knows where we are in the world, or what the Haibane are, but as you are here, you are one of us now."

"Don't move much, your wings are not clean yet, and as new as they are, you wouldn't want to injure them more while they heal," Rakka added.

"Wings?" the boy asked. His wings suddenly and violently twitched, causing a small yelp from the five Haibane girls attempting to clean them. "What is going on?"

"Hmm. Let's start at the beginning. Do you mind if I smoke?" Reki asked him.

"Just don't blow it in my face and I don't care." This comment caused a giggle from the girls, relieving some of the tension in the room. Reki stared at her cigarette pack for a few seconds before putting it away. _I can have one later._

"Okay then, tell us about the dream you had in the cocoon."

Seeing no reason to withhold from the strange girl, the boy began in detail to discuss his dream, including as many of the flashing images that he could remember. At the flashing images, many surprised faces greeted his eyes, coming from the girls. When he had finished, Reki looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. _'A horse, prancing about free and wild. A Wild Horse...'_

"Ranma."

The girls turned to Reki as she spoke. "Ranma is another name for a wild horse. We shall call you 'Ranma'."

"Feather Ranma," Hikari started, "that sounds very nice. Feather Ranma, to help guide your future, as a fellow Haibane, I give you this Halo."

As Hikari spoke, she opened a container that resembled a rod with a circular head. The head of the mold was round and had a hole in the center. Inside was a brightly glowing yellow halo. The halo was flat, as if it had been tempered that way with a blacksmith's hammer. Hikari pulled it out with a pair of tongs and set it lightly upon Ranma's head.

"Be careful, it's still hot," Kuu warned him. Ranma was sure he didn't want to touch it, since steam had poured out from the halo mold when Hikari had opened it. The halo wobbled a little on his head before settling in place. Ranma, who had sat up during the telling of his dream - inadvertently knocking Rakka and Nemuu off the bed with his large wings - tried to look up to see his halo. A soft, golden glow was all he found when he tried.

"Oh, so he gets a halo and a name and I don't," came an irate voice from the other side of the room. The new girl was sitting up on her cot.

"As we said earlier, it is tradition to name the Haibane after the dream they had while in the cocoon," Kana said matter-of-factly. "Though most of the Young feathers don't respect the tradition."

At this, the new girl's demeanor changed. She now looked to them with more than a little apprehension before replying, "Oh. So, you are going to name me after my cocoon dream?"

"Yes, that's right. Now, tell us about your dream. Was it a bad dream?"

"Kana! No need to assume the worst. I'm sure her dream was fine." Nemuu gave Kana a disapproving look as she said this.

"You... want to know my dream?"

"Well, yes. You don't want us to call you new girl forever," Reki said sympathetically, joining in the conversation.

"No, I don't like that," the girl said slowly with a bit of a pout.

"Okay then, tell us all about it!" Kuu beamed, her previous fear gone at the prospect of hearing a new story.

"Well, um, you see..."

"Nabiki."

All turned to look at Ranma. He however was looking at the raven winged girl. "Nabiki," he said again. "Her name is Nabiki." Staring at Ranma dumbfounded, it was Kana who first found her voice.

"What do you mean, 'her name is Nabiki'? She hasn't said anything about her dream yet. How would you know her name?"

"I'm not sure how I know, I just know. When I saw her just now, I started seeing flashes of things, events... Images from the past I guess. I don't remember much at all about my past, but I remember her name is Nabiki."

With the others still dumbstruck, Kana pressed on. "So you're telling us that you remember things from your past?"

"Not much. An image here, a word there... What little I remember is all jumbled up. The only thing I'm sure on is her name is Nabiki, and I am, or was, my Pop's only kid."

"Ranma, that's more than any Haibane remembers about what they were or where they came from. No Haibane is supposed to remember their past lives, not one thing! It's just not done! Her name will be according to her dream, as it SHOULD BE!" Kana was nearly screaming by the end, causing tensions to rise. She was justified in her attitude though. This whole ordeal was very stressful and unheard of, so such reactions were not within Kana alone; she was just the first to say something. Kana turned to the raven winged girl and demanded hotly, "Now, tell us your dream!"

"Kana! No need to make such a fuss! There have been many new things today that we've never seen before, so it IS possible!" Reki was getting more and more irritated as she spoke to Kana. In such unknown waters, they needed to keep things quiet and calm.

"I DON'T REMEMBER, OKAY? I didn't have any dreams! I don't know what happened, I don't know why I'm here or where here is, and I don't know what is going on! I don't know my name, but I will not be called 'new girl' or Rei, or Zero!" If the raven winged girl looked scared or angry before, she seemed nearly hysterical now, with tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

The outburst was all that was needed. The room fell silent once more. Only Reki truly understood how this girl was feeling, being a Haibane struggling to remember her own dream. Before anymore argument could be made, Hikari stepped forward and opened the halo mold again, taking the initiative.

"Feather Nabiki, to help guide your future, as a fellow Haibane, I give you this halo." With tongs in hand, Hikari pulled out another halo from the mold and set it on Nabiki's head. A collective gasp from the four other Haibane girls, (Reki giving her the benefit of the doubt) showed their belief that the halo wouldn't stick. Nabiki was perturbed at this, since the halo stuck with no problem.

"What? Surprised that a Haibane with black wings can wear a halo on her head?"

A great deal of head shaking told her they'd rather not argue again. After a moment in which Ranma moved to sit next to Nabiki, the other Haibane lined up and bowed to the new pair.

"Welcome to Old Home."

Authors Notes:

It may easily seem that Ranma and Nabiki are both out of character. That may well be true, but look at it this way. Ranma spent 10 years training, and learning to adapt to odd situations. Therefore I believe that while possibly irritated that something like this could happen to him, he isn't really all that fazed by it and is trying to adapt quickly. As for Nabiki, before Ranma arrived in her life in the Ranmaverse, she always had a cool head because she had a strong control and understanding of things that were going on. In most situations where she was caught off-guard she sometimes would appear shocked and her mask would crack, but in general she'd do her best and make do with the changes unless she could do something about it. I'm assuming that in a situation where not only has she lost both control and understanding, but also her past memories, that she would react with a much greater amount of emotion, including fear.

Also, for those who may be wondering what happened to bring these two into the Haibane Realm, I might write that story as a later chapter from Ranma's memories as they slowly stick together. Ranma will never have total memory returned to him, just a few things that will be important. As for his curse, I haven't yet decided, but many of his other personality quirks will present themselves.

2. Settling in

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here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

Thoughts

* * *

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"Welcome to Old Home."

Haibane Ranma

"Thanks for having us," Ranma bowed his head in response. Nabiki also bowed her head and muttered something resembling a thank you. "So, what do we do now?"

Reki smiled at the pair. "Well, since we were prepared for this event, we have all managed to get some time off from our jobs for it. Well, all except for me, but then my job is never really done around here anyway, thanks to those little brats." The look on her face beguiled the fact that she really did enjoy taking care of the Young Feathers.

I've seen a look like that many times before, I'm sure of it. Ranma looked at Reki with curious eyes. "What is it that you do here?"

Nabiki added her two cents to the question. "Yeah, what kind of job would you have that is never completed? I doubt I could stand to have a job like that."

"Reki helps take care of the Young Feathers by cooking and helping the House Mother teach them the basics in school." Nabiki's gaze swung over to Kuu, who spoke up in answer to the questioning pair. As was often the case, Kuu was smiling brightly, knowing that she was able to answer the questions of these two exciting new haibane.

"So you all have jobs? What do you do?"

Hikari took this moment to explain the work that the haibane do. After all, they had all day available to spend with the two New Feathers, Ranma and Nabiki. "Well, I work at one of the bakeries in

town. It's the oldest one, and the only bakery that allow the haibane to work for them, but it is very fun."

"Yeah, and Hikari is very good with coming up with new ideas for pancakes too, right Hikari?" Kuu said with a smirk. Rakka sported a pout on her face and gave Hikari a disapproving look.

"Heh heh heh..." With eyebrows curved up nervously, Hikari allowed an appropriately shamed sweat drop. "Anyways, Nemu has a job too; she works for the city library."

Rakka's frown turned to a smile in remembrance of her experience there. "The library is filled with so many books; I don't think anyone has ever read them all. There are some that talk about the origins of the world too! No one really knows if they are true though." Rakka sighed wistfully, having seemingly forgotten that she was not alone. Since she continued to stare at some invisible bug on the ceiling, Hikari continued again.

"Kana here works for a clock maker, which is funny since she is rarely on time. Almost makes you wonder why he keeps her there."

"Hey! I am not late that often! I'm usually right on time," Kana finished with a smug smile, irritated at having her tardiness in question by her peers.

"You are always in a rush to get there everyday though, Kana. Even Rakka who was with you recently said you were late getting there. She even said you seemed quite proud of it."

"Rakka!" Kana frowned at the shy haibane, who was still observing the ceiling rafters. "Besides, I wasn't proud of being late, I was proud that my watch was telling the correct time."

Desiring to break up an argument he could see coming, Ranma interjected a question in hopes to change the subject. "So what about you, Kuu? Do you work too? You seem too young to have a job."

"Oh I do little jobs here and there for people. Mostly I help clean up places, though recently I've been working at a caf   bussing tables and such." Kuu's grin was still there and was becoming catching if Ranma's face was any indicator.

"So what kind of pay do you get at these jobs? Pretty good I hope, and what kind of money do people use? What are the different rates of it?" Nabiki's interest in the conversation was only built up at the prospect of getting some cash to get better clothes. She did not want to stay in this white robe any longer than she had to.

"The haibane are forbidden to earn money for their work. Instead we keep track of what we make in these." Reki answered, pulling out her Haibane Notebook. She held it out for Nabiki to view. It had a reddish brown cover with some silver metal coverings over the corners and part of the outer edges. On the front was a picture of what looked like a T with the arms angled down a bit and longer, with a little type of fringe or claw-like quality at the ends of the arms. There was a small halo above that, making the picture appear to be a person standing with their arms out and hands open with a halo above their bowed head. Well, if the person was really thin. Below that,

written in a recognizable Japanese was the words, 'Haibane Notebook of the Haibane Renmei'. Below that still was written in a smaller vertical oval was the name "Reki". Nabiki's horrified look told Reki that she wouldn't be examining it herself.

"So you don't get paid for your work here? Why are you doing it then?"

"It's not like that. The amount we would earn is written in the books and then we use that amount when we need something and pay with a strip from the notebook with the amount on it."

Nabiki thought curiously at this. _So, what is to stop anyone from putting in more than they earned from their work? Hmm... I'll have to see how this one works in the real situation._

"Speaking of spending, why don't we go into town and get you two some clothes? I'm sure you don't want to stay in those rags," Kuu offered. _It would be nice to get them out into some fresh air and it would help dry their wings anyway._

"I don't know about that, Kuu," Nemu said. "Remember, they might not be up to that yet. They aren't even fully healed from yesterday." Kuu looked up at Nemu disappointed but conceded. Ranma, however, agreed with Kuu's idea.

"I feel just fine. I'm sure something like a walk is no sweat for me. Let's do it! I don't want to stay cooped up inside anyway."

After a little discussion, the favor went to Kuu and Ranma.

"Oh WOW! Look at this!" came a voice from the doorway. Standing there gawking at the only boy in the room were three Young Feathers, one was pointing at Ranma. More specifically, at his wings, since Ranma himself wasn't visible through the other girls in the room. As if to emphasize the focus of their attention, Ranma's wings twitched violently at the sudden outburst.

"Whoa! They're huge! How did they get to be so big?" said the little girl haibane at the door.

Reki slapped her forehead in frustration. _No matter what I do I can never get them to stop being so damn curious that they ignore the signs._ "Hana, Shorta and Daiku. Why can't they ever leave me alone," Reki muttered. "What are you three doing here!"

Even the loud and scary Reki was not enough to make the three run, for the strength of their curiosity was much greater as they looked at the huge wings coming from one of the two on the cot. Each had their own thoughts as to whom they belonged to.

"Which one has the huge monster wings?" Shorta asked excitedly to no one in particular.

"It's the guy from the courtyard cocoon of course," Daiku replied.

"No way, it's got to be the girl from the northern cocoon!" Hana said in a huff.

Sighing with defeat, Reki stepped aside to reveal Ranma to the three, knowing that she wasn't going to easily get them to leave this alone. After all, nothing would have gotten herself to let it be without knowing either. As she expected, the three quickly shut their mouths as they looked at the boy sporting the huge wings. Unfortunately for Ranma, they also decided to show their welcome to him in the form of a group dog-pile. The pile didn't last long though, as Shorta caught sight of a few black feathers in his face. While still in the middle of the small wrestle with Ranma, Shorta's eyes followed the black feathers until he found its' source. They were connected to the shoulder blades of the girl he had found yesterday just out of the cocoon on the north side of Old Home. Ranma was immediately given respite.

"Aaaaaugh!" Shorta bolted for the door in a panic, flinging Daiku off him as well, having been in between him and Hana in the pile. Shorta pointed at Nabiki with a shaking arm. "M-m-m-monster!" Hana looked up at the target of Shorta's fear and paled. She shrieked and also bolted from the room. Nabiki looked at the last of the three Young Feathers and sighed with irritation. Daiku was still dazed from the impromptu flight. So, not having seen Nabiki, he staggered to the door to follow his fleeing friends.

"Oh I can see going into town would be REALLY fun." Not even Ranma missed the sarcasm in Nabiki's voice.

"I don't think it will be that bad, Nabiki," Ranma said sympathetically. "After all, they are just kids and I'm sure the adults in town will be better about it."

Nabiki gave him a look that said without doubt, 'Are you stupid?' "Ranma, you may remember some things from before you hatched, but I'm sure that the grown-ups in town will not be as understanding as the girls here because they aren't one of us anyway. It's more likely that they will react much worse. Go into town? Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to pass."

Kuu looked at Nabiki thoughtfully. Then, sneaking up behind her, Kuu plucked a small feather from Nabiki's left wing. With a yelp, Nabiki glared at the younger girl and spat out, "What was that for!"

"I'm going to pick out some clothes for you, but since you don't have your own notebook yet, I'll need to pay for it with a feather of yours. I'll also put your name down for you. Do you have any preference?"

"I don't care, as long as I'm out of these rags," Nabiki said bitterly. "I'm sure I can find things to do around here, so I'll be fine."

Reki took this as an opportunity to cop out of going to town, since she didn't really want to go either. She also wanted to talk to her about her wings. "I'll stay with you. We can work on getting you settled into a room, since this is the guest room. Most of the rooms here in Old Home aren't being used, so you'll have many to choose from. Some will need more work than others though."

"Well that sounds good to me, so let's do it!" Ranma was quite enthusiastic, and jumped up with excitement. However, with the size of his wings and the sudden movement, the white robe he wore could no

longer take the stress, and the bindings in the back came loose, causing the garment to be removed from its host and drop to the floor.

Oh shit. Ranma instinctively shot to the corner of the room, unintentionally leaving the garment where it lay. He raised his arms defensively, not really thinking of modesty, but preparing to be on the receiving end of a very painful blow, all the while stammering out apologies. The damage had been done, however, and many loud shrieks came from those present.

* * *

>A red handprint stung on his face as Ranma walked with Rakka, Kuu, Nemu, Hikari and Kana toward the town of Glie. Ranma was now redressed in a brown dingy robe, which had its wing-slits cut through the top to accommodate his oversized wings. The girls still sported small blushes on their faces, and Ranma couldn't look them in the eyes.<p><p>

Flashback

While Ranma was redressing in a small storage closet attached to the guest room, the girls were talking among themselves. The fact that Ranma was a boy that wasn't a Young Feather in a Haibane Nest that had never before had one was a fact that hadn't really hit them before the unwanted display a moment ago. Why a boy had hatched here and not at Abandoned Factory was really a great surprise when they thought about it. A New Feather male had never been hatched in Old Home as far as anyone knew. The whispering wasn't lost on Nabiki, who was also listening in, not having been nearly as stunned as the other girls. Stunned yes, just not as much. Ranma walked back in to the others, a bright red handprint becoming more and more pronounced on the left side of his face.

"Funny. For some reason I thought for sure I was going to get hit with something much harder, like the table," he commented as he took a chair and sat backwards on it, facing the bed the others had moved to. A shattering crash behind him told him that he had knocked over the vase of flowers that was on the table. Ranma sighed. "I'll get it."

The girls giggled a little at Ranma's misfortune. "With his wings so big though, it kinda makes him a bit klutzy indoors, huh?" one of the girls whispered. Ranma wasn't sure, but he suspected that it was Kana. He finished cleaning up the mess and sat back down.

"So, um, Ranma," Rakka started, a very guilty blush on her face. "Does it still sting?" At his nod, she continued. "Um, I had closed my eyes. Who was it that slapped you?" Rakka knew she had a hand in it.

"Judging by the number of times I was struck in the same spot, I'd say every one of you had a turn." Ranma's expression wasn't one you'd have thought was only a few minutes ago totally ecstatic for going to town.

End Flashback

Ranma's thoughts were interrupted while he walked when he noticed Kuu

running circles around him as they went. He smiled at the energetic girl. Of all of them, she seemed to be the first to recover, either having forgotten the show or gotten over the embarrassment of it. Before he could stick his foot in his mouth about it though, he was saved by a most unlikely hero as his stomach made known its displeasure. The rumbling was enough to scare a few birds out of the field to his left. Kuu giggled.

"I think big brother Ranma is hungry! Let's go get something to eat first when we get to town." Kuu's smile was as bright as ever, and was enough to get the others out of their blushing state.

"'Big brother Ranma?'" Nemu asked.

"Well yeah, he's with us in Old Home, and he's older than I am. It's like I've got a big brother for the first time!"

Hikari smiled at this. _It's nice that Kuu can get so easily attached to him. I'm sure he will be fun to watch. Kuu might give him a headache though, if she tries to imitate him. Thinking of it though, she hasn't done that in a while._ "Well, that makes perfect sense. I'm not sure I'd call him big brother myself though. He might be younger than I, so I'll just call him Ranma."

The group walked on, chatting about little things. Most of it was about the town and what they do at their jobs, and answering Ranma's few questions. It wasn't long before the town was in view. Ranma started growing a little apprehensive as the town got closer and closer. He wasn't at all worried that people might react badly at his large wings after what Nabiki had said. Nope. Not at all.

Entering the town, the group made their own subtle impression. Most who entered or exited the town went by cart or on occasion a scooter. When the haibane enter on foot, it often brings a little attention their way. With Ranma in the group, the attention was a bit greater than usual, as those who would normally smile and wave actually got up and approached him. There were many who stayed where they were though, figuring they'd catch the news from the grapevine later. Those who did approach had many questions about the new haibane with the enormous wings. After all, something so new, and in the opinions of some, so bizarre was going to be the talk of the town for the next few days at least. Information was not forthcoming to the townspeople though. Most of their questions were questions the haibane had themselves, so it wasn't long before the people let them be and went back to their lives.

They'd been walking for only a few minutes before Ranma's stomach gave them a reminder of their previous plans. Laughing again, the girls led an embarrassed Ranma into the nearby caf   to order some lunch.

"You must really be hungry, big brother Ranma. You haven't eaten since you hatched and that was yesterday afternoon." Kuu's words were confirmed as another rumble came from Ranma's stomach. She giggled and bounced up to the counter to order some food.

"So, I really gotta endure this whole 'big brother' thing, huh?"

"Aw, come on, Ranma. It isn't that bad," Hikari sympathized. "Kuu is

really sweet, and you'll like her as a little sister."

Little sister. That's kinda nice; I don't think I've ever had a little sister. Then again, I don't think I've ever had any siblings, but I can't be sure since my memories are so badly shattered.

"I've ordered us some sandwiches everybody! Hey Ranma, since you are new, the owner said you could have as much as you can eat, so feel free! You can pay him with a feather for now. Just try not to knock anything over," Kuu teased.

"Yeah, very funny, sis." _Sis... It feels nice to say that. I think I can fit in easily in this kind of family._ Ranma chose a sandwich and dug in with a gusto he didn't know he had.

65 sandwiches and a call to the bakery and butcher later, Ranma bowed humbly to the caf  s owner. "I'm so sorry; it was just all so good I couldn't help it. Thank you very much though." Ranma thought for a moment. The owner looked at him with despair. How was he even going to break even today, let alone make profit? "Well, I'm sorry it isn't much, but take this until I get my notebook."

With that, Ranma braced himself and grabbed one of the feathers from his wings. Just before he pulled, Nemu took his hand and moved it to another feather. "Don't pull one of your pinion feathers. They don't grow back." Ranma nodded and yanked out a very large feather from his wings. Biting back the pain, he handed the feather to the owner and bowed his thanks again before signing some paper. Afterward the group headed out.

"Wow, big brother Ranma, you eat a lot! You'll need to work hard if you are going to eat that much every day." The other girls nodded in agreement to Kuu's statement.

"I just hope that feather of yours will cover it. The Haibane Renmei will collect it because they cover the costs of these expenses until you have your notebook," Nemu said. Ranma looked at her and then thought about it. _Oh boy. I'm toast. I bet I'm going to owe my soul if this is my normal eating habit. I hope it's just because I hadn't eaten in so long._

Kuu led the group next to the clothing store where they had taken Rakka not many days ago. It was facing a small alley, and looked dirty and run down. The inside didn't really look much better. The owner was listening to some music from a headset attached to a small radio. Upon seeing the haibane enter, he rolled his eyes and removed the headset. The shopkeeper was a young man about his mid to late twenties, with a scruffy goatee.

"Welcome in. What brings you here to-" the man stopped, having seen Ranma struggle through the doorway. Once he was in all the way his wings snapped open in all their glory and Ranma winced in pain and frustration. The movement had put his right wing into a bunch of shirts hanging from a rack and his left wing knocked down a stack of pants atop a countertop. Ranma bowed in apology.

"Sorry, I'll get it." _Geez, this is so frustrating. That little girl Hana made controlling your own wings look easy, why can't I keep them from knocking things around? Maybe it just takes some time._ Ranma moved to pick up the fallen clothing, which snapped the store owner

out of his daze.

"Ahh. Well, you must be new; I know I've never seen you in my store before." He turned to grab a box of used clothing and placed them on the table. "So, what is his story? I've never seen a haibane like him, let alone with you from that place you call Old Home. All the boys I've seen come from the abandoned factory the other side of town."

"He's new, hatched yesterday. We don't really know why his wings are so big." Hikari looked at the box of clothes, then up to the shopkeeper. "There were two actually, but the other one didn't feel up to coming, so can I pick out one for her?"

"Another boy?"

"No, this one is a girl. She didn't feel comfortable coming to town yet. Maybe she's shy." Hikari didn't want to straight out lie to anyone, so she found it easy to say Nabiki was just shy since she didn't really know if she was or not.

"Yeah sure, but you'll need to sign for her, and only if you have one of her feathers."

"Okay, I have one."

Ranma and Hikari both set about the task of selecting some clothing for Nabiki. Upon asking him, Hikari learned that Ranma didn't remember much about what kind of clothes Nabiki liked. It didn't really surprise her, but it couldn't hurt to ask. They eventually settled on a pair of blue jeans and a smart looking collared shirt with a pocket over the left breast. Embroidered on the pocket were a small golden halo and the words 'Heaven bound'.

Ranma looked around a bit longer for his own outfit. It wasn't more than another five minutes until he found one he liked. It seemed familiar and comfortable to him. On the end of one rack in the far corner of the little shop were a red, sleeveless, Chinese silk shirt, and a pair of black pants that went with them. He picked them up and took them to the counter to pay.

"Hey, you've got good taste. It's a shirt like mine." Kana praised Ranma's choice of clothing.

"Yeah yeah, feathers please," the shopkeeper coughed. Ranma signed the pad of paper then passed it to Hikari to sign. After Ranma handed a feather to the man, Hikari set the raven black feather Kuu had on the table. The man looked at it before taking it hesitantly. "Well, whatever. Weird things come my way on occasion."

The man looked at Ranma again. _Hmm... Regular wing slits aren't going to work without him ripping the shirt. It looks like they found a way around it though, so I'll adapt to it. Besides, even though this outfit is used, it's still in great condition, and silk is very difficult to work with._ "Okay, turn around for a second. I need to see how this is going to work for you."

"Oh don't worry; I'm sure we can cut the wing slits on our own." Hikari's smile was genuine, and she was sure she'd do an acceptable job.

"I don't think so. This isn't cotton or linen you are working with. Besides, I did this last time, might as well do it for all you new haibane." With that, the man tailored the back to allow the wings to rest on top and then button the tops together with an extra flap of silk underneath them. The process took almost 30 minutes to finish, but was still pretty quick, and very well done. After Ranma was changed in a room the shopkeeper supplied, the group bowed in thanks and left.

"Let's head back home, it's getting close to supper time and I'm sure Nabiki would like to try on her new clothes." Kuu smiled happily, oblivious to the nervous laughter coming from the other girls at the thought of Nabiki.

* * *

>Earlier at Old Home<p><p>

Nabiki sat on the bed in the guest room thinking. So much had happened in such a short time, and she was trying to piece it together and calm herself from the panic she was still feeling inside and desperately trying not to show. She felt better after the welcoming from the girls of Old Home, but she was still freaked out by the total loss of memories from her past experiences. It was a lot to take in. Feeling like she would never be able to rebuild any kind of life she had before even if she could remember it, Nabiki heaved a heavy sigh and flopped backward on the bed.

"How are you feeling, really," Reki asked, breaking the silence. She knew that this had to be hard for the new haibane. Her own experiences when she first hatched so long ago were very rough. She had an idea how the Young Feathers would behave around Nabiki's raven wings. When she was younger her wings had black spots on them and many of the others around then were afraid of her. Not all of them though, and for that she was grateful. "It must really be feeling rough for you. I'm sure in many places black wings are not welcomed with much warmth, and this place is no exception. If you'd like, I have something that can help though."

"Unless it can give me memories, make my wings white or end my existence totally, it won't help." Nabiki sighed again in resignation.

"It won't help you remember, but it can make your wings gray," Reki offered.

Nabiki thought about this for a few minutes. It seemed like a good idea, but by now everyone in Old Home had to know that there was a girl with black wings living here now. What would be the point in trying to hide it? "Nah, that's okay. I'll just have to deal with things as they come. I am sure I can find a way to plan ahead and come out okay." A few more minutes of silence passed before Nabiki spoke up again. "Reki?"

"Yes?"

"Why did my wings come in black instead of gray like everyone else's?"

Reki paused for a moment, picking out the best way to word her answer. "It is said that the haibane who are born with black in their wings are Sinbound Haibane. The Sinbound are those haibane who will never find peace. Their dreams are nightmares, and when their Day of Flight comes, they will not be ready. What happens to them after that, no one knows. No one knows what happens to any haibane after their Day of Flight, but it is certain it isn't pleasant for the Sinbound."

"So basically, I'm going to go through hell while I'm here, and then go to hell?"

"That's one way to put it."

"Great. Just great."

"But you aren't alone. I too was born Sinbound. That is why I know as much."

Nabiki sat up with surprise etched on her face. _I'm not sure how much more I can take._ "But why are my wings black? What did I do to deserve black wings?"

Reki sighed empathically. She herself wasn't sure of this one, so she went on what she knew. "It is said that it has something to do with who you were, but no one really knows. It's more likely that is said because people are afraid of the Sinbound. As if our sin would become theirs. That is why I dye my wings. I couldn't take the way people treated me."

"Reki, how long have you been a haibane?"

"Hmm... I'm not sure. I was a Young Feather when I hatched, and I haven't been one for around seven years. The only person who is here now that was here when I hatched was the House Mother. I suppose that is why everyone assumes I should be the leader, and why they give me a hard time."

Over seven years. I hope my Day of Flight comes sooner than that. I don't want to have to be in hell's waiting room forever. Wait... What does that mean? "Reki, what is this 'Day of Flight'?"

"The Day of Flight comes when it is time for a Haibane to leave their nest. They go out into the Western Woods usually. What happens beyond that is not really known. We only know that the haibane will go beyond the Wall on that day."

"The Wall?"

"Yes. There is a wall that surrounds this place. There is a lot of area, but it is all surrounded by walls and no one is allowed to go outside them except for the Toga, a group who come in regularly to trade with the town. No one here knows anything of the Outside. The haibane are forbidden from going near the wall, and are never to touch it."

"Why? What will happen if we do?"

"The haibane who touches the wall will die."

This shook Nabiki up again hard. _So I'm a prisoner. Held captive in a place I've never known and my memories are taken from me. I know no one and no one knows me. What did I ever do to deserve such a fate?_ Unable to take anymore, Nabiki started to cry. Reki comforted her and soon had a large damp area on her shirt as the sobbing girl let out all her frustrations at the events that removed her world and gave her one she wasn't sure she could take. Reki knew what it was like. She had her moment like this long ago.

"It isn't as bad as it seems. You just need to cheer up. Forget about what it means and try to live life here as happily as you can. That's what I do. And if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm not far away. Now come on. Let's help find you a room and get you settled in. Besides, you won't want people talking about how you are sharing a room with a boy your age, right?"

This sobered Nabiki a little, and though still sniffing a little, she nodded and dressed in a drab brown robe like Ranma's had been before he left for town. After checking a few rooms and replacing the door of one when it fell inside, Nabiki finally chose a room on the north side, three doors from Reki's room, facing the north. Preparing and cleaning the room took the better part of the afternoon and when it was all over both were dusty and hot with sweat.

"Its fitting you chose this room, you know. Just below your window is where you cocoon was," Reki said with a little fatigue. She looked around the now clean room. The floor was made of some cold stone that while a bit age-worn was still in good condition. There was a bed on the west side of it that had once been beautiful brass, but like the floor also showed many signs of wear, and was now more comfortable looking than fashionable. The sheets had been removed to be washed. There was one window in the middle of the northern wall, and it was bare, having no curtain. A small writing desk was on the east side. The desk was made of a red colored wood that had no finish on it. There was a large sheet of leather covering most of the surface to provide some smoothness to write on so as to keep the papers from ripping while you wrote. A matching chair stood in front of the desk. A small closet was in the southern wall across from the bed and next to the door.

The two girls, satisfied with the cleanliness of the room, left to gather Nabiki's things from the guest room so she could move in and get better settled. By things, Nabiki meant anything from the guest room that she thought she could use to help give her room more life. Since nothing really suited her fancy though, she stepped out onto the balcony to get some fresh air.

Looking down, Nabiki spotted a man wearing dark robes and a mask fiddling with something at the Southeast exit. She watched curiously before calling Reki out to her.

"Hey Reki, who is that?"

Reki peered over the side to the man walking out. "Oh, that man was from the Haibane Renmei. He's probably come with a message and some new supplies for Ranma and you. Let's go take a look." Reki turned and headed out the door with Nabiki in tow.

"So who are the Haibane Renmei, Reki?"

"The Haibane Renmei, or Charcoal Feather Federation look out for the haibane. It is because of them that we are able to live with the townspeople and earn our keep. They have a temple several miles from here that you will probably have been summoned to. There you'll meet with the Communicator. He'll probably lecture you about something, but I wouldn't worry. He's like that."

"Kinda like Taskmasters?"

"Oh not at all. Think of it more like a councilor who also looks out for our needs. I guess they are kind of like a father too, since they lay down the rules for us. It works out for the best in the end."

By this point in the conversation both girls had reached the table and board at the southeastern entrance. Sure enough, hanging on the announcement board was a summons for Nabiki and Ranma to the Temple. A small note said that the two of them should come together with one of the haibane to return the halo molds as well.

"Oh hey, your name plates are here also," Reki said pointing to two small boards with Ranma and Nabiki's names on them, hanging from some pegs on the wall with the others. "You use these so people know if you are here or not. White means you are here..." Reki pulled off Nabiki's plate and flipped it over showing her name in red. "Red means you aren't."

"Simple but effective," Nabiki said appreciatively. She then looked down at the table. "These then must be our Haibane Notebooks." Nabiki picked up the one with her name on it and looked through it. A loud clattering from behind her caused them both to turn around. Crouched on the ground gathering up some crayons and paper onto a metal tray was the House Mother.

The House Mother was an older lady, with gray hair tied up in a tight bun behind her head. Her clothes were mostly gray and had fringe on the cuffs and neck, giving her that grandmother look. Maybe great-grandmother looks. Her eyes though said she still had much life within her and from what Nabiki could see, probably quite a stubborn streak. By the look of the cobblestones nearby, Nabiki surmised the woman had tripped over one that jutted up a bit.

"Are you okay?" Reki asked as she moved over to help the older woman to her feet. Just as Nabiki thought, the lady shrugged off the offer to help her up.

"I am not as frail as I look, I can still move around just as easily as you can." The woman then noticed Nabiki walking over. She spared a glance at her raven wings then nodded. "Ah, you must be the new girl I've been hearing about. What is your name?"

"I've been named Nabiki," she answered.

"Nabiki, eh? Well Nabiki, you behave yourself and don't cause any trouble and we'll have no problems alright?"

To say Nabiki was shocked was an understatement. Her expression however hid her shock perfectly. She waved it off. "No problem."

"Good. Well I've got to finish getting this back to the classroom."

Don't forget, Reki, I expect you back in there tomorrow."

Reki sighed. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

Watching the woman depart, Nabiki leaned over to Reki. "That went over much better than I thought it would. Maybe Ranma is right and people won't care much about my black wings."

Looking at her, Reki replied, "I wouldn't count on it. That old lady has been here for so long I don't think anything could surprise her anymore. And speaking of Ranma..." Reki glanced over Nabiki's shoulder. "...here he comes now. It looks like they are back from town."

"Hey Nabiki!" Ranma smiled and waved to her as his group walked through the arch to the courtyard. Kuu grabbed his shirt from behind and turned him to the message board on the wall.

"You've gotten a summons from the Haibane Renmei, Ranma! Looks like it's for tomorrow. And here's your notebook and name plate." Kuu gave a quick explanation to Ranma about the name plate and handed the remaining notebook to him. Nabiki wasn't paying attention to those things. _Hmm... Odd, but those clothes look so natural on him it's like they were made just for him. Maybe he used to wear them all the time, or maybe I'm just imagining it. He wears it well though._

"Yeah, you all just missed him. He dropped them off a few minutes ago. Did you remember to pick up some clothes for me as well?" Nabiki asked.

"You bet, Nabiki. We weren't sure of your size though, so we gave it our best shot at picking it. I hope it fits." Ranma grinned and handed over a bundle of clothes to her. "The guy at the shop said we could only have one new outfit. All the rest of what we get has to be used clothes."

"Yeah, and half the time he doesn't clean or sort them before putting them on the table for us to look through. Some of them are still pretty decent though," Hikari put in.

Kana also decided to comment on this. "It's like Nemu says. The guy is a cheapskate. But hey, sometimes we get lucky with some good stuff."

Nabiki looked again at the small bundle in her hands, this time a little apprehensively. _So we get people's scraps? Great. I'm going to have to go next time so I can be sure not to get something old and ragged._

Kuu danced about the group joyful of the events of the day. "Hey, let's get you changed and talk all about town with you, Nabiki! It was really fun, and I'm sure you want to get out of the robe right? To the guest room!" And with that Kuu took off to the eastern building, holding her arms out as if she could fly with them. Ranma laughed and followed with the rest of the group.

In the guest room the girls and Ranma were talking excitedly about their trip to town with Reki. Nabiki was in the storage closet changing. Rakka had opted to help her into her new clothes, as it

wasn't all that easy the first few times getting your wings into their slits. After a few minutes Rakka came out and announced Nabiki's entrance with her new clothes. With a sweeping bow she stepped aside and Nabiki entered the room. The outfit fit her just as well as Ranma's fit him, and hugged her curves nicely. With the jeans, the little halo on the pocket and her raven wings, the overall effect gave Nabiki a sassy look.

"I'm very surprised it fits so well, even though I wasn't there to try it on. Thank you." Nabiki gave a small bow in appreciation. As she bowed her wings spread out to the side with the bow, giving the gesture a little more grace. A jumble of comments and compliments came from the girls at the table as Nabiki found herself a seat with them.

"I'm going to get some drinks for us, I'll be right back," Rakka turned and left to get some cool punch for them. The others smiled appreciatively and continued to chatter among themselves.

"So Nabiki, what did you do all day?" Kuu asked the raven winged haibane.

"Reki and I talked for a while and then we cleaned up a room for me. I also met the House Mother."

"That old grouch is always giving Reki a hard time," Kana laughed. "She take you well?"

"It was weird; she didn't react badly at all to my black wings. She basically just told me to keep my nose clean."

Ranma gave Nabiki a funny look. "Your face looks fine, Nabiki. Why would she worry about something like that?"

While the other girls laughed at the comment, Nabiki gave him a flat look. The boy HAD to be trying to be funny or something, right? With the confused look on his face, however, she could tell he was not trying to be funny. Nabiki mentally slapped her forehead.

"It's an expression, Ranma. She meant for me to not get into trouble."

Ranma thought about that for a moment, and then as though the light came on, he slapped his fist on his palm in realization. This only caused the girls to laugh harder. Understanding that he became the butt of a joke, Ranma gave a little pout and crossed his arms. Just then, Rakka returned holding a tray with a pitcher of cool punch and some glasses.

"I'm back! I hope you like the puuuwaaugh!"

Rakka tripped over her feet, sending the contents of the tray flying at the girls seated at the table. Time seemed to slow down as the cold liquid flew through the air and doused Ranma and Nemu with its sugary goodness. Ranma felt a strangely familiar tingle and twisting motions from within and looked down at himself. Time resumed its speed to normal, though from reactions it seemed as though time stopped completely. Seated where Ranma had once been was now a shorter, busty red-headed girl wearing his clothes. Her wings dripped purple from the beverage that had been spilt on her. Once again the

first person to recover was Kana.

"WHAT THE HELL!"

"Hmm," Ranma mumbled, "I'd say I knew I was forgetting something, but that wouldn't work because I didn't know I had forgotten it, though I did know I had forgotten lots of things - oh this is hurting my head." Flashes of memories came back up into Ranma's mind. "I hope this will come out of my clothes."

"Who cares! What the hell happened to you!" Kana was more than visibly upset, and it looked as though the other girls were beginning to recover. The rest of the questions came out in a jumbled mess. Still staring though was Nabiki. Images were flashing through her head as well.

A scared girl with red hair A confident Ranma standing over a defeated boy with brown hair and some kind of wooden stick A story of a training trip a valley filled with pools with bamboo poles sticking out of it

"It's a curse," both Nabiki and Ranma said at the same time. This silenced the others, who were looking at one or the other of the two newest haibane.

"A curse? I would have expected Nabiki to have one, but not you," Kana bit back. Nabiki took offense to this, but kept it to herself for now. "Explain this."

"Well, I don't remember how it happened, but from what I can remember, I turn into a girl when I get hit with cold water, and hot water turns me back. I guess it isn't just water though." Ranma sighed as she continued to look down at her returning developments.

"But you don't know why you have it?" It was more of a statement than a question from Kana. Nabiki recovered and chose to put in her piece.

"It was from a valley filled with many cursed pools." Seeing she had everyone's attention, she continued from what little she could recall. Ranma fell in when he was out training. It wasn't long after that that we met. That must be why he knew me." _This is strange. Why am I starting to remember things about my past? I wish I could remember more, but I just can't. What was my family like? Hmm... Maybe I'll remember more if I stay near Ranma._

Nemu stood up, calmly walked over to a sink and grabbed a towel to dry herself off. She took one of the glasses on the floor and filled it with some hot water and gave it to Ranma before handing him the towel as well. "The water should help get all the punch out too if your quick."

"Thanks, Nemu." Ranma triggered the change back and toweled off. "Well, I guess this explains why I was hatched here, huh?"

"And just how did you come to that conclusion?" Kana asked, still upset.

"Well," Nabiki interjected, "He's half girl and half boy, so why

not?"

Kana turned on her. "He should have been born in abandoned factory anyway, that nest is co-ed. Oh I give up. Who am I to say what should be anyway, no one really knows even why we exist." With that, Kana turned and left the room.

Reki watched the moody haibane depart, and then decided it would be best to let the two new haibane alone for a while. It seemed as though this experience was sparking memories that should have been completely forgotten, and she wasn't about to take their chance to remember more away. Maybe something good would come from it. So, gathering the other girls, Reki left the two alone to talk.

"Ranma?" Nabiki said hesitantly.

"Nabiki. You remember me a little now too, huh?"

"Yes, but I don't remember much. I remember you were a confident fighter before, and that you trained hard every day. I don't recall much else. But I think if we are around each other enough, we might both remember more."

"Sounds good to me. So, uh, what were you and Reki talking about while we were gone to town?"

Nabiki thought about this. She didn't want to confide in him that she was Sinbound, that wound was still too fresh to her, and she had the feeling that Ranma would probably dwell on it too much, so she left that part out and simply stated, "Oh nothing of great interest. Just idle chit-chat and she told me about this place and answered some questions about what life will be like here. She doesn't seem to think highly of the Haibane Renmei, but I think it's just her opinion."

"Ahh. I see." Ranma stretched out a bit. The stresses of the day were starting to get to him. His day was very full and for someone who was still recovering from his ordeal, he was becoming quite tired. He closed his eyes and relished in the feeling as his back muscles unwound a little. A dull thud caught his attention and he opened his eyes.

Nabiki had taken the stresses of the day much harder than Ranma had, and her body finally gave out. She fell to the floor exhausted, shaking a little from the weariness her body was experiencing. Ranma quickly moved to her side on the floor.

"Nabiki! Are you okay?"

"Y-yes, Ranma. I guess my day was harder on me than yours was."

"Well, we are both still healing from a big change in our bodies," Ranma said, then muttered under his breath, 'three for me', and continued. "It's no surprise we are both so tired." He looked back at Nabiki who didn't respond. Upon closer inspection, he determined Nabiki had passed out. Since he didn't know which room was hers now, he picked her up and laid her out on the large bed. Pulling the covers over her, Ranma looked at the girl now peacefully sleeping on her side._ He's a connection to my past. I don't know what happened

to cause us to be here, but I will be your friend, and will protect you as best I can. Sleep well, Nabiki._

Ranma moved the cot to the balcony outside and with a blanket of his own curled up on his side facing Nabiki and fell into a blissful slumber.

* * *

>Author's Notes:<p><p>

Thank you for being patient. It wasn't until a few weeks ago that I realized how difficult it was to write these, but I am enjoying it greatly. I'd like to thank those of you who commented on my work and gave me your 'two cents'. I hope to hear from more of you as to how I'm doing. Well, Nabiki is starting to calm down a bit and get used to the fact that she is living a new life. In the next chapter we will be looking at the Summons to the Temple, as well as the beginnings of some strange dreams. See you next time, I'll try to get this next one out sooner.

3. What Dreams Reveal: Pt 1

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. The lyrics are graciously borrowed from the popular song by Evanescence. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

Thoughts

* * *

><p><p>

The moonlight played lightly across Nabiki's face in the darkness of night. The breeze was light, and gentle, and only slightly disturbed the hair of the young raven-winged haibane. Within such a calming night, Nabiki's eyes twitched, in a restless sleep...

Haibane Ranma

Chapter 3

"nki... biki... Nabiki!"

Nabiki started inside, having been brought out of thought by the voice of the younger girl beside her. She didn't let this show, though. She had a reputation to uphold, afterall.

"What is it, Akane?"

"Are you okay, oneesan? You seemed a little spaced out." Nabiki looked at the girl across from her. She was younger than herself, though not

by much, and had black hair cut short with a slight blue highlight. The blouse she wore was a pale yellow and had a few flowers on a vine printed up the left side of the front. Her baby blue skirt was obscured by the small table that separated them. Brought out of her daze, Nabiki recalled with whom she was in the company of and where.

The room itself was fairly small, though it had a table with some snacks in various stages of consumption and two comfortable benches on either side. There was a small stage past the table where another girl was currently singing a peice she did not recognize. Two more girls sat on the bench with her, and the other bench was occupied by Akane and two boys.

"Yes, I am fine. Why shouldn't I be?"

"I don't know, you just... oh never mind. I'm up next. Those three don't stand a chance."

The three she was referring to were the three other girls. _This is so stupid, but I couldn't find any other way to do this. Gees, if my own sister noticed then I must be slipping worse than I thought. I hope this works. _Nabiki took a tentative look at the others, hoping her mask was still firmly in place, and reaffirmed their positions.

Singing girl. Xian Pu. Chinese Amazon who assumes she is married to Ranma. Very complicated mess there, though I'm sure I can figure out how to clean it up. I'm missing something there.

First to my right. Ukyou. Ranma's childhood friend and betrothed, bound by acceptance of dowry. The friendship factor makes the relationship easy, but the loss of the dowry makes this one even harder to solve. Need to find out what happened to the dowry.

Second to my right. Kodachi. Psychopath. Believes that Ranma is her Knight in Shining Armor because he's the first boy to be nice to her. Dangerous mind there, and has no inhibitions. Have to be very cautious around this one.

To Akane's left. Ryouga. Status: Passed out. Best friend/Rival of Ranma's. There is some bad blood there, though Ranma doesn't seem to see it that way. Not much of a concern to me though.

To Akane's far left. Ranma. Chaotic Center of Nerima Madness. He has many good points, though most are overshadowed by his faults. Asked me to help him solve his fiancÃ©e problem.

Xian Pu finished the song and took a seat, earning the best score of them all so far. There was some polite applause, though the tension in the air gave the impression that this was a real competition, rather than a fun time among friends. Akane took a spot in the center of the stage and began a song.

With her thoughts focused on other matters, Nabiki allowed the song to go sung without her attentions on its words. Before too long though, the song was completed, a decent score given, and Akane returned to her seat. _Now or never._

The girls were all chattering away with apprehensive excitement to Ranma when Nabiki rose from her spot on the bench and walked to the Karaoke machine. An almost deafening silence shrouded the room while she made her selection. After a few moments of hearing nothing but the clicks and beeps from the machine, Nabiki took center stage with the microphone, and, taking a deep breath, began to sing to a song from an American artist.

_ "How can you see into my eyes, like open doors?_

_ Leading you down into my core, where I become so numb?_

_ Without a soul, my spirit's sleeping somewhere cold_

_ Until you find it there and lead it back home_

_ Wake me up! Wake me up inside!_

_ I can't wake up! Wake me up inside!_

_ Save me! Call my name and save me from the Dark!_

_ Wake me up! Bid my blood to run!_

_ I can't wake up! Before I come undone!_

_ Save me! Save me from the nothing I've become!_

_ Now that I know what I'm without, you can't just leave me._

_ Breathe into me and make me real! Bring me to life._

_ Wake me up! Wake me up inside!_

_ I can't wake up! Wake me up inside!_

_ Save me! Call my name and save me from the Dark!_

_ Wake me up! Bid my blood to run!_

_ I can't wake up! Before I come undone!_

_ Save me! Save me from the nothing I've become!_

_ Bring me to life!_

_ I've been living a lie..._

_ There's nothing inside... Bring me to life!_

_ Frozen inside without your touch - without your love,
Darling_

_ Only you are the life among the dead._

_ All of this sight, I can't believe I couldn't see_

_ Kept in the dark, but you were there in front of me_

_ I've been sleeping a thousand years it seems_
_ I've got to open my eyes to everything_
Without a thought, without a voice, without a soul.
_ Don't let me die here_
There must be something wrong.
_ Bring me to life!_
Wake me up! Wake me up inside!
I can't wake up! Wake me up inside!
Save me! Call my name and save me from the Dark!
Wake me up! Bid my blood to run!
I can't wake up! Before I come undone!
Save me! Save me from the nothing I've become!
_ Bring me to life!_
I've been living a lie...
There's nothing inside...
_ Bring me to life!_

* * *

>The room was dark, with only the moonlight providing any illumination. Nabiki awoke slowly and with great reluctance. Her eyes fluttered a bit as consciousness slowly brought her to reality. The curtains framing the balcony swayed slightly in the warm night air.<p><p>

What was that? Such a strange dream, Nabiki thought to herself. _I wonder what that could have meant. Ranma seems to remember some things from his past, is this perhaps something from mine? But if it is, why would I remember it now? Is there a reason for these dreams? Maybe I was right though, and being around Ranma will help me remember more._

A light draft crossed her face, bringing with it the memory of what had happened earlier that night. Nabiki looked down at herself to discover the blanket that though a bit rumpled now, had just recently been covering her against possible chill, though the night was warm. _Did Ranma do this for me?_ A noise from outside the room revealed Ranma, sleeping peacefully on a cot outside, his blanket barely covering his middle. A light snoring caught her attention, and Nabiki couldn't help but smile a little. _He seems to be so totally accepting of all this, sleeping like he doesn't have a care in the world. I wish I could feel so carefree about all of this. Perhaps when I have a better understanding of everything. Then I might be able to see how it can work to my advantage._ Nabiki took a moment to ponder this. _If Ranma's wings are big enough to fly, maybe I can

earn some extra charging for him to show off or something._ Further thoughts became muddled as sleep began to once again assert its control over her body and she slipped into a restful slumber.

* * *

>Ranma woke up with a jerk as the door to the room opened to an entering Nemu and Rakka, chatting happily as they carried in a few dishes of foodstuffs. Neither noticed Ranma as they set them on the table and began gathering some plates and silverware. The smells from the dishes caused Ranma's stomach to protest loudly to its current lack of fulfillment. Folding up his blanket and moving the cot to the side, Ranma entered the room and obtained the attention of the other two with a tongue click. Once he had their attention, he jerked his thumb to a still sleeping Nabiki. The two nodded, and motioned Ranma over to them.<p><p>

"Hey, Ranma," Rakka started, "is Nabiki a light sleeper?"

"I don't really know, but it may be best not to wake her anyway. It was a long day for the both of us yesterday."

"I know what you mean," Nemu sympathized. "When I was a newborn I was always tired and slept a lot."

Rakka snickered. "I hear that this is a normal thing for you though, Nemu."

"Hey now, be quiet."

Ranma watched as the two exchanged a little friendly banter before he rejoined the conversation.

"So, is this where we always have breakfast?"

"It seems that way," Rakka huffed.

"Reki brought a large table from town one day and put it in here," Nemu supplied. "Since it was the biggest one in Old Home, this room more or less became a guest room slash dining room. The youngfeathers don't eat with us all that often though. They are usually eating in the room where the House Mother and Reki teach them."

"So breakfast is going to be served here?"

As if on cue, Reki, Kuu, and Kana all entered the room, conversing about the crows that were bothering Kana during the morning trash run.

"Good morning, girls," Ranma greeted the entering trio.

"Ahh, and how is our two Newfeathers this morning, Ranma?" Reki was always glad to see the new Haibane. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah," Kana chirped in sarcastically. "Hows the fender, Gender-bender?"

Ranma shot Kana an irritated glare but otherwise ignored the brazen comment. "I slept well, Reki. I don't know about Nabiki though. I think she had it rougher than I did, but I am probably just more used

to things like this in my previous life than she is. I'll bet she'll be hungry when she wakes up though. I know I am."

"I AM awake, you know."

All heads turned to where Nabiki lay, still on her back staring at them through bleary eyes that refused to acknowledge that morning is the proper time to rouse oneself. Her clothes were all rumpled from having been slept in and her hair was quite messy. All in all, she looked like hell.

"Mornin' Nabiki. Been awake long?" Ranma asked, oblivious to Nabiki's mood.

"Yes, Ranma. I was awake before the sun came up, took a bath, got all nice and presentable and THEN decided to go back to sleep."

"Why would you do that?"

Nabiki, who had gotten up enough to be resting on her elbows, face-faulted back into her pillow. While a few girls moaned about the obliviousness Ranma was displaying, Kuu and Kana found it funny for different reasons.

Breakfast was a very entertaining affair. The meal was simple enough, but Kana had taken a liking to finding just how many different ways she could insult Ranma without him understanding the jibes. Not all went misunderstood though, and Ranma was getting more and more irritated with the younger Haibane. Then everyone got a good laugh at seeing Ranma's Aquatransexualism a few times when Kana switched to findind out how many times she could get him hit with the appropriate water. Ranma, however, was not amused.

"Oh come now, Ranma, you should just enjoy yourself. Besides, there isn't anything wrong with being a girl," Nabiki said between giggles. Ranma gave her a pointed look. "Anyway, its not like there is any harm done, right?"

"How would you like the feeling of a thousand worms all squirming around under your skin? Thats about what it feels like."

The girls flinched back at this and all voiced their thoughts with a chorus of 'Ewww's.

"So, Nabiki," Nemu started, "You and Ranma both have the trip to the Temple today, right?"

"Yeah, we probably get going soon, huh? Do you know the way, Nemu?"

"I do, and if you want I'll take you there since the Library is closed today."

"Thanks, Nemu, that would be a big help." Ranma smiled.

I am SO not looking forward to this. I probably didn't like Temples or Shrines before, because I certainly don't like the idea of going to one now. Maybe they can answer some questions for me.

* * *

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The air was crisp and refreshing as the three Haibane walked along the road that lead to a series of cliffs. Trees lined one side of the road and on the hills to the other side you could see huge windmills. There was a light breeze, just enough to move the sails of the mills, and that slowly. The walk was a pleasant one, and the conversation light.

"So Nemu, tell us about the Temple. What kind of place is it?" Ranma began to have images of various temples, shrines and dojos that although familiar he didn't really remember well.

"The Temple is the center of the Haibane Renmei. It is kept in a small cove in the cliffs near a waterfall. The walk to it can be precarious sometimes, but the view is nice."

Almost as if she anticipated the question, Nabiki tilted her head toward Ranma and answered, "It means dangerous." _Why would I feel the need to tell him that?_

"I know that, I'm not stupid," Ranma said defensively. The look on his face and the hand behind his head betrayed him though, and both Nabiki and Nemu laughed. He may not be the most educated or well mannered person, but both girls felt they could relax a bit around the large-winged boy. Much of the rest of the walk was also joined with pleasant banter between the three. As they rounded the corner of the cliff face and the Temple came into view, Nemu spoke up again about their destination.

"A few things about being here, you are not allowed to speak while on the grounds. We'll be given some bells that we will use to communicate with."

"We can't speak? What kind of garbage is that?" Nabiki huffed. "Am I supposed to jingle a bell in some kind of Morse Code?"

"Not that I know what 'morse code' is," Nemu said without looking back at the two, "But no. Two bells will be placed on your wings, one on each. Two will be on your wrist." Nemu stopped and turned to face them. After stretching her arms a bit, she angled slightly to the left and moved her right wing up a bit. "This is your 'no' wing. The sound of the bells are different, so its easy to know if you are saying yes or no. The other is your 'yes' wing."

Ranma groaned. He had not yet gained any kind of mastery over the use of his wings and new that this could get messy if he screwed up. He may not care much about what most people think, but it was smart to at least try to give a good first impression. With this in mind, he gave an attempt to move just his 'yes' wing.

Nabiki spared a glance over to Ranma while Nemu continued her explanation of how the visit was expected to go and temple manners. Seeing the young man's face scrunched up in deep concentration caused her to smirk a little. _He's either trying to take this all in, which would mean he's not just a little ignorant but also stupid, or he's practicing with those huge wings of his. I'm betting on the latter._ As if in response to her thoughts, Ranma's efforts were rewarded with a sudden spasm of both wings, sending a few of the smaller feathers

off in a wind-moved flurry. _Yep. I'm right._

"Ranma, did you hear me?" Nemu asked, having been interrupted by the little scene. Her eyes rolled at Ranma's befuddled look. "I was trying to tell you the right way to behave in there. You don't want the Communicator to get upset with you, right?"

Ranma began to walk across the bridge with a haugty gait, letting his pride show. "Of course I do. A good first impression is somethin' any guy wants to be sure he gives, and I am a man aren't I?" As if to spite him just for the comment, some of the water from the top of the waterfall shot out and descended upon him. The girl-turned boy just groaned while the girls giggled at his expense.

"That depends on who you ask, Ranma." Nabiki's smug grin was enough to deflate Ranma's rising ego. Without any other word the aquatransexual haibane continued on to the Temple ahead.

* * *

>Reki sat at the Guest Room table, still thinking about the events of the morning. It had been a fairly peaceful affair, though Kana was being a little too excitable in her fantastic telling of the Communicator's ability to read people's minds. Sighing, Reki lit up a cigarette. I hope the old man doesn't scare Nabiki too much. He has a way of irritating people like her and I.

"Hey Reki. Have you seen Rakka?" Kana had entered while Reki was in thought, and so she hadn't yet been noticed by the older haibane.

"She's with Hikari today, trying her hand at the bakery. Thinking of, don't you have work today too?"

"Nah. Master gives us all Sunday off. I was thinking I could show her what I'm working on in the tower, but I can show her tomorrow. I think she's comming with me anyway to Master's place. Oh well. See ya!" Reki nodded in Kana's direction as she stepped out. _I can just guess how tomorrow morning is going to go for Rakka._

* * *

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The man from the Haibane Renmei moved over to Ranma next. Having placed the bells on the other two girls already, he finished his task by looping a pair of bells on the red headed girl's wrists and resting the other two bells on the peaks of her wings. As he placed that last one on her right wing, it twitched quite violently, sending the bell flying off the cliff and into the depths of the water below.

"Heh heh... Sorry about that." Ranma had the decency to blush at her accidental blunder. The other two girls groaned and Nabiki went as far as slapping her forehead, since there wasn't anything close enough to bang it on. The man took it in stride though as if it hadn't happened and produced another bell from his pouch. After being sure it was on right, he pulled out four small pins and thrust them through the loops on the bell straps, securing them in place so that any more spasms wouldn't send the bell flying. _Gee. I hope he

doesn't have to go down and fetch the one I tossed._

The man led the three of them into the first anteroom of the temple and left them there. Nabiki took the moment to check the place out. It was quite rustic in many ways, though more like an ancient ruin that hadn't been 'ruined' yet. The trees and foliage spread about had a clean and well cared look, as if to represent some kind of organized natural chaos. Moss and some mushrooms, and the lack of any roof made it look as though it was only recently abandoned and the people before took great care in its upkeep. The effect it gave was an all natural beauty that was almost surreal.

"Haibane." The sudden voice as if from nowhere startled Nabiki from her inspection. "Why are you here?" After a pause, Nabiki started to open her mouth to reply, but was cut off as the voice continued. "One is the Haibane returning the Halo Molds. The other two are the Haibane that I sent for. Is this correct?" Ranma and Nabiki looked at Nemu upon hearing her bell give a 'yes' jingle. "Very well. Proceed into the Garden."

The trio continued forward to a large door, although Nabiki moved with a slight hesitation at first. Then gaining confidence again, she moved forward with a cool demeanor. The Garden looked very similar to the room before them, though there was a high ceiling of several stories. It was brightly lit, enough so that it almost looked as though it had no roof to it, and the natural light from outside were doing the job instead. Nabiki bumped into the back of Nemu, who had stopped several feet away from a man in front of them who was slightly hunched over and used a walking stick with a haloed ball with wings on the top. A second man approached Nemu and retrieved the molds from her before walking off to some unknown area of the Temple.

The man, whose masked face revealed nothing about him, looked first toward the redheaded girl. "You are Haibane Ranma, are you not?"

"Yeah, who ar- ow!" Ranma's words were cut off by a brain duster from Nabiki. Forcing herself to concentrate, she very slowly managed to move her yes wing.

"You should endeavor to learn how to move your wings better. Haibane Nemu will teach you after your visit." Ranma blushed in embarrassment. "I am the Communicator." He turned toward Nabiki. "And you must be Haibane Nabiki. Am I right?" Nabiki bounced her yes wing with ease.

"Perhaps young Nabiki here will help you as well." Ranma didn't think he could get redder, but he was quickly proved wrong.

"Haibane Ranma and Nabiki. Though you are still getting used to your new home, I have a task for the two of you to seek out work. The Haibane must work to earn their keep and be good Haibane. Be good Haibane, and take care to be an example to the Young Feathers."

"Excuse me," Nabiki interrupted, much to Nemu's panic. "What about me? Do these... black wings mean I'm already not a good Haibane?! Why the hell must I be punished for something I don't remember doing?!" The silence that followed was deafeningly uncomfortable. When he

spoke, there was no irritation to be heard in the Communicator's voice at all.

"Your question is a fair one, Nabiki. However it is not one that can be answered so easily. You will learn in time the answer to your question, but I will not be the one to give it to you."

Seeing she would get nothing more from the older man, Nabiki backed down, though not without an irritated look at the Communicator first.

"Go now. I will call for you again soon. Haibane Ranma. You will stay here for a moment, then catch up to your friends."

* * *

>Nabiki marched out indignantly. She was dismissed! After roughly shoving the bells back to the man outside she adopted a fast pace back to the bridge, Nemu hot on her tail.<p><p>

"KAMI that man is annoying!" Nemu could only nod as Nabiki vented her frustrations out. Reki had been much the same when she was done at the Temple on her visits, and Nemu was accustomed to it. She could see that Reki was going to be one of Nabiki's greatest friends. If she stuck around these two often enough, though, she wasn't likely to get any naps in the afternoon.

"How do you deal with him like that?" Nabiki's voice still carried much irritation.

"Oh he isn't that bad. He doesn't tell much about what you want to know. He usually only tells you things you need to know. Its his way of helping the Haibane grow."

"Well his way sucks."

"Ha ha! Reki would agree with you. You and her are much alike you know."

"If you say so. Lets get back to Old Home. I'm not much in the mood for talking right now."

"Shouldn't we wait for Ranma?"

"He's a big boy. Or girl depending on the weather. I'm sure he knows how to get home, and if not it isn't hard to find it." Without another word Nabiki took off toward the nest.

I hope so.

* * *

><p><p>

Ranma walked into the courtyard of Old Home quietly. The Communicator didn't keep him long, but it was a discussion that really got him to thinking. He could feel a headache coming, but was relieved when he heard the laughter of some of the Young Feathers. Looking up he was greatly surprised to see seven of them deeply involved in a game of Tag with Kuu and Nabiki! After their reaction to Nabiki yesterday he

wasn't sure she'd get along well with them. As he got closer to the group though, he could tell by Nabiki's expression that she was not playing Tag with them because she wanted to. But the Young Feathers really seemed to enjoy it. Ranma sided up to a very winded Nabiki.

"So what got them all chummy with you, Nabs?"

"When I... got back... They all... crowded... around me... to play." Nabiki continued to gasp for air; a statement that she'd either been doing this for quite a while, or that she wasn't used to getting this much exercise. "Reki told them... that my black wings meant..." She paused for a moment as her face changed expression. "Nabs? Where did that come from?"

"Eh? Oh. Sorry about that. I don't know where it came from, but maybe I used to call you that from before. Sorry."

"It's fine, Ranma. I'm not sure I want to be called that from anyone else though. It just feels weird."

"So how long have you been 'it'?" Ranma took his focus to the game, totally forgetting why the kids would suddenly want to play with the 'monster' of yesterday.

"About 5 minutes, I think. Not very long. It's been a double-team thing. The rugarats were all it first, and Kuu and I were trying to keep away. They got me fast, but Kuu can really move."

"Yeah, that doesn't surprise me at all."

Nabiki's expression darkened. "Just what do you mean by that, Saotome?"

Ranma looked at her curiously, oblivious to the fact she had taken his comment as an insult. "Saotome?"

Derailed temporarily from her ire, Nabiki thought for a second. "Probably my nickname for you or something. Don't change the subject on me. Just what did you mean by that?"

"Just that Kuu's name is supposed to mean 'Air', and you know how the wind moves."

"Oh." Having had the irritation extinguished, Nabiki looked back at their little 'battlefield'. So far, Kuu had caught five of the seven running around. Nabiki hadn't caught any yet, and it was just Hana and Daiku left. Hana was currently in a stalemate with Kuu on either side of the courtyard's fountain, and Daiku had stopped near the entryway to Old Home to take a breather while they had a short impromptu break. Kuu noticed the positions and saw an opening. Giving a look at Ranma, who noticed also, she gave him a silent signal. Ranma leaned toward Nabiki a little.

"Hey Nabiki," he whispered, "if you make a quick dart backwards and a little to the left, you just might catch the boy."

"Thanks." Nabiki shot off after Daiku who hadn't noticed the sudden change of tactic. Hearing the suddenly loud footsteps got him to look up just in time to see Nabiki lunge out to grab him. He 'eep'ed and

darted off to the side to avoid being caught but couldn't escape as Nabiki got hold of his foot and they both tumbled in a heap.

"Daiku!" Little Hana, who had been watching shrieked out as she saw her comrade fall. This however proved to be the mistake to end the game as she was suddenly scooped up by a laughing Kuu, who swung her around and around, dizzying the little girl.

Ranma gave a hearty laugh as he watched Hana struggle to keep her balance once she was put down. When she fell into the cold water of the fountain it was not quite so funny. Ranma cast her a worried look and walked over to the shivering little girl.

"Are you-" a splash from the giggling little girl interrupted the boy-turned girl. "...okay?" The other Youngfeathers started to cry out excited. "Its true!" "How wierd." "Someone get a cup of hot water, I wanna see it again!"

Ranma groaned for the upteenth time that day. _This is going to be a looong night._

* * *

>Authors Notes: Wow. I can't believe it took so long. Part of the reason for the lateness of this chapter is that I had never actually finished watching either Haibane Renmei or Ranma 1/2, though I had seen most of it. Now I have seen how both of the Anime versions end and got into writing again. It was a bit difficult to figure how I wanted it all to go, and I'm sure someone is going to flame me for the song I put in here, but I assure you it is there for a reason other than filler. I will be posting in the Ranma 1/2 section later, a kind of prequel that will go over the events leading up to this. I'm glad to have gotten the reviews I have! . b Thank you very much! bows I will see you next update, which hopefully won't take so long. Oh, and this one didn't make it through my pre-reader yet, so it may be modified later.

—

- Xilore

4. Stretching One's Wings

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. The lyrics are graciously borrowed from the popular song by Evanescence. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

Thoughts

Haibane Ranma

"Damnit, Kana! Ya don't have ta wake me up with water in the morning!"

"Oh calm down, Ranma. I'm not Kana and I'm not going to climb up there to wake you up."

A dripping Ranma-chan looked down to the grass where Nabiki stood, holding a pail in her hand and a sardonic grin on her face. She looked well pleased with herself.

"Come on, Ranma. We've got breakfast ready and I want to get our lesson with you today over with." Without giving or awaiting another comment, Nabiki turned and walked back toward the entrance to Old Home as if she didn't care whether he got up or not. She may not have.

Ranma looked down at herself. She was dripping wet. _Either she has good aim, or I am just a magnet to that stuff. Man, now I need to dry these. If I had another change of clothes, I would wear them, but it looks like this will have to do._ Ranma took her pants off and wrung as much water out from them as she could, finally whipping them out to get the last bit off as was possible. They were still damp, but at least the sun would dry them in short order. Having restored her pants to her skin she hopped off her perch, landing lightly on the ground because of her parachute-like wings, and looked up to the tree she had spent the night in. It was a tall oak with the lowest branches a good 16 feet up. The branch she had slept on was large and a bit flat on the top surface, providing a surface only suitable to sleep on for one who was used to sleeping on hard ground or stone. For Ranma, it was ideal, and outdoors with lots of shade.

As she was in mid-turn to go inside, her eyes caught something white on the other side of the tree. Walking around the base of the old oak, Ranma found peices of what looked like a large shell, and a little of the base of where it had seemingly grown from the ground. _I remember Hikari mentioned to me that Nabiki was hatched on this side of Old Home. I wonder if this is what remains of her cocoon? Mine was all cleaned up before I awoke, so I've never seen one before._

Ranma examined the remains of Nabiki's cocoon slowly. She checked one side, and then the other, noting that little more than half of one side still remained whole. All in all, it was her curiosity that caused her to remain so long instead of heading to the courtyard, where Nemu and Nabiki would be giving her a few lessons in gaining better control of her wings so she would not keep accidentally knocking things down at random. The House mother had gotten after her for that before, and it wouldn't do to have her wrath continually inflamed at her. Looking to either side as if worried what the others would say, Ranma gingerly stepped into the remains of the cocoon and tried to curl up in it, savoring the strange feeling it supplied her emotions. Tried; but because of her very large wings and difficulty controlling them, her back spasmed and broke off a sizeable peice of the shell. Ranma sighed, and with a slightly sad smile took off in search of some hot water before her lessons began.

* * *

><p>The lesson wasn't going very well for Ranma. It had started when Nabiki asked him to try moving his wings and scowled at him when he

grabbed one with each hand and shook them with a smirk. 'I will not help you if you won't be serious about this,' Ranma thought in his mind with a poor imitation of Nabiki's alto. As if reading his mind, Nabiki shot him a glare that would have killed little black piglets on sight, though since it wasn't directed at one, she recieved a sigh and eye-roll from Ranma instead.

"Ranma, can you even feel your wings?" Nemu asked, unusually more aware than the other Haibane make her out to be. "That may be your problem. Some haibane have difficulty learning to use their wings at first, so maybe that's it?" Nabiki, who had walked behind Ranma during this, lightly grasped Ranma's wings at the base. His wings gave a slight twitch.

"Can you feel my hands, Ranma?" Ranma nodded stiffly. From the ammused expression on Nemu's face, it would seem that Ranma was feeling slightly ticklish there. The shiver that followed confirmed it. Nabiki had to clamp down the urge to tickle him in revenge for his little assinine attitude for her earlier request. It was difficult not to give in. "Close your eyes and try to feel where my hands are." Slowly, Nabiki slid her hands along the humerusl of Ranma's left wing. The shivers continued so nabiki moved on to slide her hands along the radius and ulna. When she reached the carpus and metacarpus the wing spasmed and Nabiki had an idea.

"Ranma, where did you feel your muscles move when your wing did?" Ranma looked thoughtfully at this.

"It felt kinda like it was underneath my chest, but a little to the side," Ranma answered after a moment. "Why?"

"Do you think you could move those again? On purpose, I mean?"

Ranma stood still for a moment. Nothing happened. _He'd better be trying at least instead of just standing there_, Nabiki thought.

"Could you touch that spot again, Nabs? If it spasms again I think I will know how." Ranma scratched his head with embarassment. "I, uh, wasn't paying attention the last time you did that." Ranma blushed a little. _Where was his mind then? This is important! The Communicator was quite upset that Ranma couldn't move his wings right, he should be more focused on the task at hand._ Nabiki grimaced.

"And just what WERE you paying attention to, Ranma? You know I value my time, and spending it trying to help you learn something you should know already isn't my idea of being efficient with it." Strangely, Ranma blushed a little deeper. Nabiki thought about this. Just as realization hit her so did Ranma's wing, knocking her off her feet and onto the cobblestones. The pain helped nabiki keep her own blush from heating her face. Much.

Ranma, having heard an 'eep!' from Nabiki, turned to see her sitting rather uncomfortably on the ground behind him. "Sorry about that, Nabs. You okay?" Nabiki shot him another glare. This wasn't looking to be a good morning. Ranma gulped audibly. "Uh, well, I could feel the muscles that moved at least."

Well, at least we're getting somewhere. This isn't a TOTAL waste of my time then. Nabiki stood up, her face composed again. "Joy. Let me

get your other side then."

Nabiki repeated the exercise on Ranma's other wing, dodging the spasms, though only barely. After an hour of practice, a grumble came from Ranma's stomach. They decided to call the lesson done and head to breakfast. Nemu had tried to help him with some basic movements, but the only real success in the session was that Ranma's wings no longer spasmed at unexpected touches. While not nearly as much reward for his efforts as he hoped, he knew that the House mother would be pleased that the damage would be reduced. The last little statue he had inadvertently knocked over was not new by any means, nor was it expensive, but Hana, who owned it, sobbed so hard when it broke it took Ranma and Nemu a good thirty minutes or so to calm her down. It was no surprise when at breakfast she asked Ranma how his lessons were. The less of her toys broken, the better. She didn't have many to begin with anyway.

"Not too good, Hana-chan. I can feel them better on my back, and I ain't movin' them by accident any more. But I'm still not able to move them when I wanna much." Ranma looked disappointed with himself. It was easy to tell by his face that Ranma was taking his minimal success like he expected much more of himself. Hana noticed this, but gave no sign. Instead she whispered to Daiku and Shorta who both grew wicked grins on their faces. Ranma was so inattentive to the world he didn't hear them sneak up behind him. Rekki put a hand on her forehead with an 'oh great. Here we go' expression that some of the other Haibane copied. All at once, the three Youngfeathers pounced, punching his body with both hands! It didn't hurt much, but as Ranma wasn't prepared for it he took it full force, and his muscles refused to take the abuse silently. Neither did Ranma for that matter.

"What'dya do that for?!" He twisted to his right to see two of them grinning widely at him. Shorta was knocked into the table by Ranma's left wing. "Now my sides and back ache!"

"That's the point, Oniisan!" Hana was positively beaming at him. "Now you can REALLY feel your muscles, right?"

"Well, duh! I don't think I'll forget that they-" The light clicked on in Ranma's head.

"Oniisan," Hana jumped in at his pause, "wanna play a game with us? It really helps!" The other two Youngfeathers cheered their mutual agreement.

"What kind of game?" Ranma was interested now. It's amazing what younger people knew sometimes!

"Clap!" "Clap!" "Clap!" chimed three voices in unison. It was impossible for anyone - even a delusional Kuno - to miss the joy in their voices. Kuu joined in with her own voiced desire to play with them. In short order, Kuu, Ranma, and 12 of the Youngfeathers were gathered in the courtyard to play. Nabiki stood nearby with Nemu, watching disinterestedly.

"It's nice to see him get along with them so well," Nemu observed. The breeze tussed her hair up a little. Nabiki's short hair swayed, but wasn't messed up.

"I guess so. They're fun to play with, but I don't think I could keep up with them all day." Nabiki seemed to be somewhere other than where she stood in her own mind. There was silence between the two of them for a time while a Youngfeather named Miya went over the rules of Clap with Ranma.

"Don't you have work today, Nemu?" Nabiki asked curiously.

"No, the Library isn't open today. It never is on Mondays."

"Oh. Well, I'd like to come with you tomorrow to see what it's like, okay? The Communicator did say I needed to find work, and observing your jobs might help me decide on one for myself."

"That's a good idea," said a voice behind them. Rekki had come out to watch the game too, it seemed. "It's what most of the Newfeathers do, though my work is really boring." Rekki took a drag on her lit cigarette. After a short pause, she added, "The game is not very entertaining to watch, let alone play, but with Ranma's wingspan, it should be interesting." The three sat on the wall of the fountain to watch as the game began.

Fourteen Haibane all sat in a circle, facing away from the center. Fourteen pairs of wings spread out to almost their full length, spaced so their tips touched the next one. Ranma was given a lot of space for this, causing Rekki to spread a rare smile on her face. Taking turns clockwise starting with Miya who was to Ranma's left, they began to clap their wings and chant the game's beginning.

We are Hai-ba-ne. We sit here

Playing Clap with fun and cheer

Clapping wings around and round

With our hands upon the ground

Touching friends with Wings of Gray

We begin this round of Play!

They had to repeat the chant three times before the game started. The first time Ranma could not get his wings to clap together, and the second time he moved them so hard and fast in an attempt to be sure of a good clap that the wind knocked two boys on the opposite side of the circle and the girl to his left forward from the force. Raka, who had come down after cleaning up the dishes, laughed at the sight of the three sprawled out on the stone and Ranma's very red face. On the third try, Ranma managed to get an audible clap without knocking anyone down, though the clap was very weak.

Once the chanting was over, there was very little to be seen going on. At first, Nabiki was sure they were just sitting there, though the youngfeather's whose faces she could see looked like they were concentrating very hard. Ranma looked as though if he were to be concentrating any harder, he might have an accident in his pants that would be the cause of much humiliation, not to mention great laughter. As she looked closer though, Nabiki noticed that there was activity going on. The youngfeather closest to her was moving one of his wings slightly, tapping the wing of the girl next to him

soundlessly a number of times. Then that girl would tap the wing on the next one in line, one less time than the boy who had tapped her. Nabiki noticed that if this was a trend, a little boy just before Kuu would be the one to receive only one tap.

"So, what happens to the one who only gets tapped once?" Rekki was shocked out watching the game by Nabiki's silence-shattering question.

"Oh! Well, the one who goes 'out' stands in the middle of the circle and pokes one of the players during the Chant. That player starts the round by picking a direction and tapping them a random number of times. At least five taps, but no more than 20. When the next person is 'out', they join the middle and two people will tap at the same time. Three people in the third round, and beyond that the person who's been 'out' the longest leaves the game. It gets very fast after the third round ends. A very difficult game for beginners, but the very fastest way to learn to control your wings." Rekki finished with another drag on her cigarette.

"How does it teach control? I think I understand, but I'd still like to hear it from you." Nabiki had become very interested in this little game.

"The clapping does two things. Exercise the wings and stretch them out. Keeps you loose, and for Newfeathers it gets them used to using them. Granted, we don't use them for much, but it's good to keep exercising them. The tapping teaches a more delicate control. Just like the human children have to learn how to moderate the power of their movements, so do the Haibane with their wings. It's a really good game, and the Youngfeathers love it so much they sometimes play twice a day. It's very boring though, once you've played it so much, so it's usually just the Youngfeathers that play." Rekki emphasized that last point by pointing her cigarette at the circle, then finishing up with yet another drag. This one finished off the stick.

"What do the other Haibane do instead?" This time, it was Kana who answered.

"Most of us have played the game enough that our jobs provide enough movement for our wings to keep up the exercise we need. Nemu plays with the Youngfeathers occasionally since the library's isles are wide enough she hardly has to adjust to the more cramped conditions that Hikari and I are used to."

Turning her attention back to the game of Clap, Nabiki noticed that there were already three in the middle of the circle and one standing outside it. The fourth round was about to begin. Nabiki continued to watch them play many games, some of which had Ranma in the middle almost at the start, and one where it had come down to Ranma, Kuu, and a boy who called himself Zu2. Ranma lost that one, but it was the closest he ever got to winning. Apparently when it was down to three people, the two others were both 'winners'. Nabiki never played with them, but since she was in such deep thought, she didn't leave them either until much later that afternoon.

* * *

><p>The following morning Nabiki was awoken by the intruding,

prodding finger of Rekki, forcing its presence into a sensitive spot just below her ribs. This wasn't a good thing for either of them, as it caused Nabiki to spasm awake so violently that her arm caught Rekki across the face in a loud, backhanded slap. Nursing her hand while trying to stabilize her shocked system Nabiki looked down at her fallen companion.<p>

"Sorry about that, Rekki. You startled me."

Rekki groaned as she sat up. "My fault. I didn't think you'd react that way. If I need to get you up again, is there a better way?"

"Probably not. I don't think I ever was a morning person anyway," Nabiki replied grumpily. "Breakfast ready?"

Rekki nodded as she stood and made for the doorway. "I'll join the rest of you after I get Ranma. I just hope I can catch him. He's really fast."

Nabiki looked at her quizzically; the new information helping to clear her head as her mind became bootstrapped enough for simple tasks. "What do you mean, catch him? I'd think he'd be racing you ****to**** the food, not away from it. He certainly eats a lot."

"Oh I'm sure he'll love breakfast," Rekki said off-handedly. "He was up early today, and went out for some exercise. He can really move, you know. He's been jumping all over the woods; bouncing off the trees and the like." Rekki thought for a moment. "Think that's where all his energy goes from the food he eats, being so active. Well, see you in a little while." With that, Rekki left Nabiki to get dressed.

Breakfast was simple but plentiful. Coffee had been made, much to the pleasure of Nabiki's groggy mind. Crossaints and butter, some jam and toast and a pitcher of juice. Though the food looked inviting, Nabiki decided it best to nurse a cup or two of the black liquid for a while before helping herself to something more substantial. Listening to some light conversation going on between Hikari and Nemu, Nabiki only looked up slightly interested when Raka and Kana rushed into the room, grabbed some food and took off out the door, Kana nearly choking on her roll in her haste.

"Hey, Hikari, how long ago was Raka born?" The coffee had started to do its job and Nabiki's question wasn't asked as groggily as earlier was.

"Raka came only about a week before you and Ranma did. It's been very lively here because it isn't often that Haibane are born here in Old Home, and three in such a short time is unheard of." Hikari paused thoughtfully, but it was Nemu who continued the line of thought stirring in the pony-tailed Haibane's head.

"Raka is still going around to everyone's jobs to see what she likes. Sometimes, more than one of us work at the same place, but not often. Usually after seeing a few places you get a feel for what kind of job you'd like. Thinking of which, we're going to need to get going soon. It takes a while to get to the library." Hikari nodded along with Nemu's explanation, though it was plain on her face that she was surprised Nemu could talk so much without napping in between.

Just as the two were about to leave, Ranma came in to sit down to breakfast. He had his black pants on and a small towel over one shoulder, but was bare-chested. This elicited a nearly inaudible 'eep' from Hikari, who failed to fight down a small blush. Lucky for her, no one noticed. Sweat slicked much of Ranma's visible frame. As he sat he gave a happy sigh.

"That always feels good! Nuthin' like a run in the morning to wake ya up, eh Nabs?"

Nabs again... it's irritating, yet I just can't bring myself to ask him to stop for some reason. I wish I knew why, it's embarrassing. In reply though, all Nabiki did was give him a level glare which he ignored. Getting no verbal reply from her, Ranma shrugged and began to dig in in earnest.

"Whatcha doin' today, 'biki?"

Oh Kami. If this is going to keep going I think I'll die of embarrassment. My name is Na-bi-ki! Not 'Nabs' or any other form! Nabiki had no problem schooling her features though. Keeping calm seemed to be second-nature to her most of the time. She would not blush at having Ranma call her pet names. She wouldn't.

"I am going with Nemu to the library to observe her job. The Communicator DID tell us we'd need to do things productive to earn our living." _It's just too bad we don't use something more material to record our wages. At least it would be nice to have new things instead of always having second-hand clothes and the like._ Nabiki mentally pouted at this, though not a sign of it showed on her face. "What about you, Ranma?"

Pausing in his ravage of breakfast consumables, Ranma thought. Nemu suppressed a laugh at seeing his cheeks, puffed out like a squirrel with a bulging mouthful of nuts. Rekki, who had arrived moments behind Ranma also saw this, and stared openly before she covered her mouth with a hand and snickered behind it. The noise caught Ranma out of his stupor.

"I think I'll stay here today and watch Rekki work. I'm not sayin' that I wanna spend all my time watchin' Miya, Hana, Zu and all the rest, but maybe I can learn somethin' more about my wings. That game yesterday really helped alot."

"Oh, I see how it is. The youngfeathers are better teachers than I am, so I'll just go somewhere where I AM wanted instead." _Why am I saying this? It's so childish!_

Ranma looked flustered and choked down the food still in his mouth as he tried to protest to her that that wasn't at all what he meant. For some reason, this caused Nabiki to feel warm inside and smile just a little. _Heh heh... he was always fun to tease. Watching him get flustered like this was always fun. Especially... when..._

"Ehm... You okay, Nabs?" Nabiki gave a start, realizing she'd been spacing out.

"I'm fine, Ranma. Just remembering something is all."

"If you two are done flirting, we need to get moving, Nabiki." Nemu's surprising sense of humor had much the same effect as Nabiki's quip a moment earlier. This one had an unexpected side-effect though. While both turned their heads to look at her and did their best to deny any such thing, Ranma's hands knocked a glass of water over, pouring the contents into Nabiki's lap. The denials stopped with this turn of events and Nabiki slowly looked up at Ranma with a completely peaceful and warm smile... if feral tigers can be said to be peaceful and warm. Before Ranma could say anything though, a splash of cold water to his face from Nabiki triggered a change to a much less modest form considering his - her state of dress.

"Thank you, Ranma. How did you know I wanted to present myself to the Head Librarian today looking as if I wet myself? If you'll excuse me, Nemu, I'll be only a few minutes. Oh, and Ranma?" Ranma just kept staring in shock at her like a deer in headlights. "Put those away before you embarrass yourself."

Ranma looked down at her chest, started, then thumped her head onto the table. If not for the consistent thumping of head on wood and the "Why me?" chanted, you'd have thought she'd passed out.

* * *

><p>Nabiki left the library that afternoon alone and irritated. It was much earlier in the day than either her or Nemu had planned to leave, but Nabiki just could not take the irritation of her morning. On the way to the library, she and Nemu had been talking about the history of the Haibane and about what books there were that contained information about the Charcoal Feather's past. After chatting most of the way to town, Nabiki went silent to digest the information. There wasn't much to digest though, as quite a lot of the facts were mingled with speculation and theory. All she was able to glean from the conversation was that the Haibane have been living in the town since before anyone else could remember, and nothing in the library hinted at a time before the Haibane were. In fact very little in the library ever mentioned Haibane. What Nabiki could understand from this much is that outside the walls the Haibane are either not written about for a reason, or they do not exist. The few books in the library that do mention the Haibane by name were written by people who lived in the town.<p>

True enough, Nabiki was not able to find much more than what Nemu had told her about in the books she worked with that morning. Nabiki browsed all the books she could while still trying to complete the tasks given her. Little of what she found was helpful, and come lunch time she had had enough. She could tell that it would not be a very enjoyable thing to be working at the library, for in spite of her thirst for knowledge the books here just didn't have what she wanted. So, she politely declined to return after lunch and said she'd walk the town for a while before returning to Old Home.

I can't believe that a town that has hosted the Haibane for so long wouldn't have more written about them! Nabiki's thoughts were roiling in her head and generating a level of anger uncommon within her. _This just won't do. _She looked down at her clothes and sighed. _If I can't find some information, maybe I can at least find some more clothes. I would rather not have to wear the same two outfits all my time here._ Resigned, Nabiki went in search of the used clothes shop Ranma and the others had gotten her current ensemble

from. She wandered around for several minutes before she found a shop with a wooden sign outside bearing a pair of scissors and spool of thread. The clothes dummies in the front bore clothing on them that was simple in design, but a very fine cut and well made. Hoping she could get something here, Nabiki entered.

The main room of the shop was not very large, but it was clean and well tended. On the walls hung a few tasteful paintings of scenery depicting animals and areas of town. Above the register, which was currently unattended, was hung a four panelled frame that impressed Nabiki. Inside each frame was a network of pins, needles and threads that had been stretched and ordered to create pictures of their own though in an overlapping way that gave a three-dimensional depth to it. The four images, Nabiki noticed, showed varying scenes, but the pattern the four held was that each was obviously a different season.

This is very good work. If this was done by the same person who has sewn the clothes in the window, then this shop must be very successful. Nabiki whistled aloud as she admired the needle work of the unknown thread artist.

"Oh! I'll be right out!" Nabiki gave a start when she hear a woman's voice call out from an attached room from the back. She turned her head just in time to see the owner of the voice entering. The woman was in her mid-thirties with dark, wavy hair which she had put up in a ponytail. She was short, and wore glasses which gave her a scholarly look. Her lack of any kind of makeup told Nabiki that either this woman couldn't be bothered with such things, or she simply didn't have any. She was not what anyone would consider beautiful, but Nabiki thought she would clean up well if she wanted. Upon seeing the Haibane in her shop, the woman's weary smile slipped. Nabiki caught the souring of the woman's mood before she slid a mask into place to hide her own irritation at her day.

"Ah. One of you." The woman's voice was flat and she clearly didn't want to be forced to spend time with her. Nabiki was about to speak when the woman's eyes darted to her back and she gave a start. _So what if my wings are black? It's not like I had a choice,_ Nabiki thought grumpily. This woman didn't know anything about her, and already she was judging her to be some kind of-

"Welcome to my shop. May I help you?" The woman bowed more politely than Nabiki could have hoped. To say Nabiki was stunned by the sudden change from this woman was an understatement. For a short moment all Nabiki could do was stare at the woman.

"Uh... I'm... just looking around, I guess." Nabiki wasn't sure, but she thought that perhaps the woman was mocking her. Even if she wasn't, she didn't exactly get the feeling that this woman really wanted her to be there, no matter how nice she pretended to be. She glanced around the shop as if to emphasize her stammered statement. Nabiki missed the twitch in the woman's eye.

"Well, do not let me stop you from looking around. You are more than welcome to look." The way she said it reminded Nabiki that the Haibane were forced to buy only ****used**** clothes, and by the look of the shop, she wasn't likely to find anything used in it except the tools. That the woman followed her around for the first few minutes didn't help Nabiki's mood at all. Finally, she turned to face the

woman.

"May ****I**** help ****you****?" Nabiki asked scathingly.

"Oh no, not at all. Don't mind me." Nabiki wanted to pull hair. Her own or the woman's hair, she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure she even cared. Nabiki thanked the Kami when the door opened and a human entered to take the woman's attention off herself. It wasn't long before the person, a man in his elder years, left the shop, but the woman didn't return to follow Nabiki around. Curiously, Nabiki looked up at the counter and saw the woman idly sewing something on the hem of a dress made of dark wool. The woman looked up from her embroidery when she noticed Nabiki standing opposite the counter, looking at her needlework.

"Something you need?" The woman's voice was cool, and her face expressionless.

"I was just wondering," Nabiki paused, glancing from the dress to the frames and then the woman. "I was wondering if you made that as well? It's very good." Nabiki was pointing at the images in the frames. The woman glanced up at the frames and then nodded, focussing again on her thread and needle.

Nabiki turned on her heel and was almost to the door when the woman spoke up.

"Would you like to see some more? It isn't often that people believe I made that, let alone compliment it. And I certainly didn't expect a compliment to come from any of you Haibane." It was the longest piece of conversation Nabiki had heard from this woman. She was even curt with the old man who came in earlier.

"Sure, I have time to kill."

"I'll be just a moment. Please wait here." With that, the woman left the room and into the back. It wasn't long before she returned with a large box frame and turned it toward Nabiki. The image was breath-taking. The needles and pins were placed so precisely and the thread so carefully woven around that the image, although incomplete, seemed to almost be alive, if frozen in place. A small stream ran through the right side of the image, a slight curve to it, and a few stones were visible within. Trees were bordered on either side as if the viewer were looking in on the scene from within the forested border of a clearing. The back panel of the box had been painted to show the Wall close in the background, and the main feature seemed to be the ruins of some kind of outdoor altar or perhaps a building that was almost entirely gone. A few threads in the very back layer of the image gave it a look as if light were dancing on the ground from a break in the clouds.

"This is amazing!" Nabiki sounded truly impressed when she said it.

"Well, thank you. It's missing something, but I'm not sure what yet." The woman seemed a little embarrassed, and she held a hand behind her head while looking off to the left. Nabiki giggled a little. _Looks kind of like what Ranma does when he's embarrassed too._

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, its just that you remind me of the other Newborn that hatched the same day I did when you do that with your hand." The woman stopped and looked at her hand.

"What did you mean earlier, when you said you did not expect compliments from the Haibane?" The woman's earlier comment had Nabiki wondering.

"Ah. Well..." The woman trailed off in thought as if considering wether or not to answer the question. Apparently she had decided not to when she said, "It's about time for me to close up. If you wouldn't mind?" And with that, she took the box frame and retreated to the back of her store. As Nabiki left the woman's shop, she resolved to return tomorrow to see if she could discover what it was about this woman's attitude toward the Haibane when the rest of the villagers seemed to always treat them so much better, or at least with a passive tolerance.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

It took me a while to finish this one. So much has been going on and I deeply appologize for the tardiness. After some of the comments I recieved from people, some of which were e-mails rather than reviews, I decided that I will be placing a note in future chapters of songs that inspired a current scene as opposed to typing out the lyrics. Afterall, I myself am not a big fan of Songfics. I may even get around to editing them out of the previous chapter. I will still be continuing this story even as I'm working on other ideas as well as an original, so please note that this story is only slow moving, not dead. b

1 These bones are the skeletal anatomy of a typical bird's wing. has some great information on bird anatomy if you are interested in information that helps with the theory of how the Haibane can make their wings move.

2 Zu means 'picture', or 'illustration'. You can probably imagine his cocoon dream quite easily.

5. Beginings of Understanding

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. The lyrics are graciously borrowed from the popular song by Evanescence. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

Thoughts

Haibane Ranma

Emotions are a strange thing. They can mix and match in so many odd combinations that even the most well versed in psychology would become confused. After having been in Old Home nearly two weeks Nabiki had gotten used to a few things. One, she was not and would likely never be a morning person. Mildly comforting was that Rakka didn't seem to be one either, and both were often groggy before breakfast. The other thing that Nabiki was becoming accustomed to was even though she preferred to sleep in, Ranma slept so heavily that every morning we woke up refreshed and chipper. This wouldn't normally be an issue for Nabiki, but Ranma's worst habit of the morning was waking her up.

Crowing like some rooster on happy pills, Ranma was crouched on the ledge of the balcony just outside Nabiki's room. _Is it considered cruelty to animals if they make the first move?_ Nabiki new she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep after a few minutes of Ranma's goofy attention. She had asked him about why he seemed so "overly complacent and sadistically happy" since they were here. It wasn't that Nabiki actually believed that he was different from what he was before coming to Old Home. Her few fragmented memories of what remained to her past were fading instead of becoming clearer. This was a great disappointment to her. The best she could tell was that Ranma was probably coming out of some shell he used to be in or something. _Or maybe he just really was always abnormally happy._

Whichever the case was, the answer she received to her question was one that she herself couldn't agree on. "Why shouldn't I be, Nabs? I am alive, I have people around me who care about what happens to me, and the Young Feathers have a childlike cheerfulness that spreads easily." Her reminder to him that they ****were**** children after all was wasted completely at the time as he went back to goofing off with Hana, Zu and Shorta.

The crowing of the horribly winged demon perched on the balcony outside became too much, and Nabiki lurched clumsily but hastily off her bed, wielding a pillow in her left hand and hurling it at the fowl monstrosity. Lucky for her, unlucky for him, his eyes were closed as he crowed and was struck squarely in the face. Ranma lost balance and fell off the balcony backwards to the ground. Not far from the balcony herself and only really half aware of herself, Nabiki looked over the edge in time to see Ranma spread his wings out in effort to slow his fall. It worked, if only a little bit, and he landed on the ground softer than he would have without them. The impact was still hard enough to be heard from the balcony Nabiki stood on, however.

"Mornin', 'biki!" Ranma called up in an I've-just-had-my-Prozac-so-I'm-good voice.

Nabiki put her hand to her face and groaned. _As much as I'm used to hearing him give me pet-names, I really wish he wouldn't where people can hear. It's embarrassing._ She let the comment slide though and went into her room to wash and dress.

Breakfast was a lively affair today, though over the last week 'lively' had more or less become the norm. Four of the Young Feathers had taken to joining them at the breakfast table, and were very talkative. _On the bright side, their chatter helps wake me up._

"So, Nabiki," Reki started, looking at the raven-winged Haibane.
"What are your plans for today?"

"I bet she's going into town again to talk to that lady in the clothes shop," Kana stated, sure of herself.

"You have been visiting with her a lot lately, ever since you walked out on me in the library. May I ask why?" Nemuu didn't seem upset about Nabiki leaving in the middle of the day, but Rakka new better.

"There is something about her. I want to know what it is. I can't help being curious. I think wanting to know things is just in my nature," Nabiki answered before taking another spoonful of breakfast. It was some kind of dish where you soaked oats in some sugar water and added cream to it. Tasty if you like that kind of stuff. Nabiki had never had it before and wasn't sure if she liked it or not. "What about you, Ranma? What are you planning to do today?"

"Well, I've thought about it for a while now â€" Hey, don't look at me that way," Ranma looked a bit put out that Nabiki and Kana both found the thought of him thinking so amusing. "I'm not stupid. I ****have**** thought about it and if it is okay with everyone, I'd like to work along with Reki with the Young Feathers as my job. Maybe I'm not that great a teacher, but I think we'd both like that." The last was said looking toward Reki. She stared back at him for a moment with no visible emotion on her face before replying.

"Yeah, you are good with them and have more patience than I do. I know the House Mother has been saying that they are enough of a handful to need a third pair of hands anyway. Good luck, Ranma. They are really bad at doing what they are told."

Cheers came from the four Young Feathers. They seemed to miss the slight on them in favor of the good news that Ranma would be joining them. Nabiki stood up and patted Ranma's shoulder as if to say 'good luck, you are so going to need it' before excusing herself.

* * *

><p>Nabiki departed the shop frustrated. She had been trying every day since their first meeting to get the woman who worked there to open up to her, but she wasn't making any progress yet. The best news she had gotten out of her was a name. The woman was named Haruka Togasaki. Apparently there was something about the Haibane that didn't sit well with her, though Nabiki still wasn't sure what it was. The only clue that she had was that Haruka was friendlier to her than she was to the rest of the Haibane. Odd, since Nabiki would have assumed it would be the other way around due to her black wings. Something there was nagging at her mind, but she wasn't sure what it was yet. It's like someone dangling something in front of you while you were blindfolded. You could feel it there, but you just couldn't figure out what it was.<p>

Nabiki sighed aloud and considered what she might do to help get her to open up. Then it hit her. _"The best way to understanding a person is to first understand what interests them. I know nothing about sewing, but maybe I could learn a bit and use that as a topic to get her to open up more. When I first complimented her work she seemed

very pleased._ So on that note, Nabiki left to go to the library, a little more determination in her step.

* * *

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"A book on sewing? Yes, we have a few. Are you a beginner or are you looking for more advanced information?" The woman Nabiki was talking to had short brown hair and was very large from pregnancy. It looked as if it was going to be born any day now. Nabiki almost felt bad for asking her to show her where to find them. On the way to where the books were, they both ran into Nemuu, who was re-shelving the books that had been returned that morning.

"Hello, Nemuu. Did you get enough sleep this morning," the woman asked.

"Hello, Sumika. I suppose I did, but I can't tell every day. Ranma is a morning person and he tends to wake most of us up with whatever he's doing at the time. This morning he was crowing like a rooster near my room. I'm not sure why though."

Nabiki grumped. "He was outside my room on the balcony, the Baka."

Sumika laughed at this. "No wonder you seem so grouchy, Nabiki; although I wonder if he does it because he likes you." Nabiki stared flatly in disbelief at the older woman. Before she could reply, however, Sumika went on. "You know, my husband used to come outside my window late in the evenings and serenade me while we were dating. I found it romantic, but I can't say that my neighbors appreciated it much. I lived in a small housing building, so I wasn't the only one living there." Sumika sighed happily. "He proposed to me in song that way after a few months."

Nabiki had nothing against romance, but if Sumika was right and Ranma was trying to romance her, he was not doing a good job like this.

"No way. That big idiot couldn't possibly be trying to romance me. It's more likely that he's trying to get back at me for something I wronged him in some other life than him trying to court me."

"Well, I'm just saying. I've never seen Ranma myself, but I hear he's quite the catch from Nemuu."

Nemuu blushed hard. "Please, stop that. I'm not interested in that way, but I'm still a young woman. I notice things."

"Well, less competition for you then, Nabiki." Sumika grinned roguishly.

"About those sewing booksâ€¦" Nabiki did not want to see where this conversation may have gone.

* * *

><p>Nabiki sat at a table in a small area set aside in the library for study. She had laid out on it four books. "Beginning Tailoring", "Sew You Want to be a Clothier", "50 Tips for the Newly Stitched", and some yellow and black covered book with the front cover partly

torn. All she could make of that title was, "â€|ing foâ€| ummies." And odd book, but Sumika said it was the most helpful if you knew nothing at all about sewing. Nabiki had been there for almost three hours, reading from the four books. While she didn't feel confident that she could make anything up to her tastes, she felt that she had at least grasped enough of sewing to know that while the rewards of a good tailor were satisfying, the effort involved was long and tiring. It did, however, give her a new respect for Haruka. In all that she read though, she had yet to find any information on those strange needle pictures that were hanging in the shop. Must be more advanced work than this. At least I know enough to try making something simple. Nemuu mentioned wing covers for winter. Maybe I can make one of those. As much as I'm not really into this, it might give me something more to talk about with Haruka to get her to open up. I just can't let this mystery go unsolved.

With quiet resolve, Nabiki continued to read.

* * *

><p>A few days had passed since Ranma woke Nabiki up by crowing at her window. He didn't see much of her anymore due to the fact that she was always in town during the day. That and he had his hands full most of the time with the Young Feathers. He was not sure, but he thought he saw Nabiki smirk at him when he had mentioned one dinner how worn out he was from it. Aside from his time with the Young Feathers, which Kuu would join in when she wasn't busy on her off-days, Ranma spent time with Reki, since she was the only other Haibane around most of the time. Old Home was starting to really feel like the home he never had before. But he had to have had a home before becoming a Haibane, right? Memories of the past were vague, and fuzzy. He thought he'd said before that he spent many years on the road, but was that right? Did it even matter? He shrugged to himself and stretched out.<p>

He looked down at the ground below himself. The remains of Nabiki's cocoon were still at the base of the tree. Hikari had once come out to remove the remains, but as per Ranma's request, she left them there. He found a strange comfort sleeping at nights in the trees above them, and wanted to keep them there. His cocoon was removed before he had a chance to say anything about it. Ranma sneezed. The weather seemed to be getting cooler these days. _Winter has to come sometime. I guess I'll have to pick a room in the dorms to sleep in soon. I would rather not sleep in the snow or rain, and it hasn't rained yet since I've been here. Maybe I'll be lucky and it won't._ He sniffed the wind. _Smells like rain. So much for that idea._

Ranma hopped off the branch and onto the balcony of Nabiki's room. He fluffed his wings a little then took a breath to crow again, but was circumvented by the same pillow that hit him the first time he did this. Unlike the first time though, he was prepared enough to not fall off. He grinned like that cat that caught the mouse.

"Mornin' to you too, Nabs."

"Don't call me that, **please**," Nabiki growled in despair. It was so fun to tease her. "If this is your idea of professing your love to me," Ranma started to splutter at the suggestion, but Nabiki didn't finish the sentence. It was so fun to tease him. "I'm already up,

Ranma. Unless you want to watch me change, I suggest you get off. If you do though, I warn you now. I'll charge you a big favor in return." Nabiki smirked as Ranma stumbled over himself and fell off the edge again.

Ranma stayed crouched on the ground for a few minutes before standing up and dusting himself off. Why would Nabiki assume that he was going to profess his lo- lovâ€¦ fondness for her? Was he fond of her? Well, once he thought about it, sure he liked her, but he didn't think it was that kind of like. He barely remembered her or what she was like. All he knew about her was since they both hatched into Old Home. Putting the thought in the back of his mind, Ranma hurried off to breakfast.

* * *

><p>"Hey, Ranma?"<p>

"Mmmghf?"

"Honestly, Ranma. Can you not swallow first?" The first to speak had been Kuu, and after Ranma's uncouth response, he was berated by Nabiki.

"Sorry about that," Ranma said after complying with the request.
"What's up, Kuu?"

"If you aren't busy today, want to go out with me-" jaws dropped around the table "to the Windy Hills to play? The breeze is nice there." Jaws closed and relief spread out. The idea of Kuu and Ranma perhaps wasn't impossible, but Kuu seemed too young for something like that. Ranma completely missed the reason behind everyone's shock though.

"No, I don't think I'll be too busy. That okay with you, Reki?"

"I can handle them myself for a while. I did it before you came anyway. Don't be too long though. Looks like it might rain." Reki sat back and pulled out a cigarette, having finished her meal.

Kuu cheered and bounced excitedly then got up and grabbed Ranma's arm, tugging him away from the rest of his meal. Ranma didn't mind too much. His appetite finally curbed to what the House Mother had called 'respectable' after about a week with them. Nabiki watched them both leave the room. The strange feeling in her stomach she attributed to indigestion.

Kuu and Ranma ran over to the southern exit and flipped their nametags over to mark that they were away and then left at a playful clip toward the hills that the wind mills spun on. It wasn't a long run, only about halfway to town. Considering the total distance though, it still took about twenty minutes or so. Kuu felt the luckiest little sister in the world when Ranma held her up into the air effortlessly and ran with her above him, parallel to the ground and holding her arms out like a bird. At the hill the spun around, chased each other, and frolicked like little children with not a care in the world. Kuu asked once for him to dive off a large rock with his wings spread out and he floated to the ground very slowly because of the wind. Kuu giggled and laughed watching Ranma's surprised face. For a small time, both felt completely free of everything in the

world. Tired, both of them sat down on that rock to take a break. Kuu looked up at him with a glow of happiness about her that couldn't be suppressed even by the clouds darkening overhead.

"Hey, big brother, can I talk to you for a while?"

Ruffling her hair a bit, Ranma grinned. "Sure, Kuu, What's up?"

"You know," Kuu started, "I've been in Old Home now for two years. It's been an interesting experience, living with all of them. Every one of them is special to me. When I first arrived, I was barely big enough to not be among the Young Feathers. I used to look up to all of the other Feathers and try to be like them. I used to mimic things about them because I admired them so much." Kuu laughed. "I once put on Hikari's glasses and tried to walk around with them on, but I ended up falling backwards down the stairs!"

"Is that where the dent in Reki's scooter came from? You riding it?"

Kuu laughed again, a little nervously. "Yeah, that was me. It's never been a new scooter, but it's looked better. Anyway, everyone had something about them that I admired and wanted to be like. But now, after so long, I've realized that instead of trying to be like other people, I needed to work more on being the kind of person I wanted to be. I had to let go of the idea that I wasn't as good as someone else, and start trying to be the person I really am. Not the people I thought I should be like."

Ranma sat on the rock in silence, thinking about this. After a few minutes silence, Kuu spoke again. "It's likeâ€¦ There is a large cup, that has been getting more and more full every day. That everyone at Old Home has been giving me some of their drops to fill it. And now, that cup is completely full. Thank you, Ranma."

Ranma felt a bit embarrassed at the praise. All he was doing was trying to be himself, just like Kuu.

"You know, Kuuâ€¦ ever since I came here, I have felt more free than I have ever felt before. At least I think so. My memories have become fuzzy. I can't remember much anymore. Sometimes I have dreams that feel like it's a part of my past, but I can't remember more than a face or sentence of them when I wake up. It is frustrating sometimes. I want to know what happened, but then I wonder if it really matters? If it didn't, why do I have these dreams? I think, that perhaps my life before must have been soâ€¦ I don't know the wordâ€¦ where I couldn't do much that I myself wanted to do. Like maybe I never had a childhood before. But here, and especially after seeing you so carefree, I feel like I have regained something that I either lost or never had. So, I guessâ€¦ Thank you too." Ranma was blushing a little at the end.

Kuu smiled at him, and then to his great surprise, leapt forward and kissed his cheek!

"Come on, big brother! Serious time is over, and we need to head back to Old Home."

After the two had walked for a few minutes, Kuu stopped. "What's up, sis?"

Kuu beamed at him. "I remembered something. Go ahead home, and I'll see you later." Kuu bowed to him and said 'Goodbye' before heading off the road and into the forest. _Oddly formal a goodbye when she sees me as a big brother._ Thinking nothing more of it, Ranma returned to Old Home shortly after the rains hit.

* * *

><p>Ranma sat on a chair in the guest room, wringing out her clothes. It didn't take much to trigger her transformation, but after talking to the Communicator at the temple it didn't bother her as much as it used to. Sure the feeling of the change still grossed her out, but it was a part of who she was. The Communicator had much to say on the subjectâ€|<p>

Flashback

"Haibane Ranma. I will allow you to speak freely. I know you are concerned about some of the differences between you and the other Haibane. Please, ask your questions."

Ranma sighed and looked down at her girl form. It was so frustrating that she couldn't be **himself **all the time. Ranma looked at the older man. She assumed he was older, as he was hunched over a bit, even though he wore a mask to cover his face. For having his eyes nearly completely covered though, this 'Communicator' seemed surprisingly perceptive. Ranma thought for a moment before speaking.

"Why am I in Old Home if it is a nest for girls? I'm a guy."

"A fair question," the Communicator began to walk about the garden, Ranma following. "There are two nests for the Haibane. The one you were born into was called Old Home by the first Haibane to hatch there. The other is called Abandoned Factory by those Haibane. While Abandoned Factory is marked as a co-ed nest, Old Home is seen as a nest only for female Haibane. However there are the Young Feathers there, whom are both male and female. Why do you suppose that is?" Ranma had no answer to this. "I will not give you the answer, but let you learn it for yourself. I will tell you that there is a connection to why the Young Feathers stay at Old Home instead of Abandoned Factory. Once you discover the answer, you will have the hint you need for the first question you asked. Do you have another question for me?"

Ranma put the information given to her aside for the moment and asked her second question.

"Why do I have memories of my past?"

The Communicator paused to consider this question before answering it.

"All Haibane that come into this world have a purpose. What that purpose is, the Haibane must discover for themselves. That you are remembering anything of your past life at all means that something there may be vital for your growth. A Haibane's dream in the cocoon is not only for their name, but is also a guide for your life here. Many Haibane take years to understand their dream, but it is

something that you should not dwell on, nor should you dwell on the memories you have. They should be seen as a guide, and nothing more. Do not dwell on your past. Think instead of your present, and use it to prepare the future you desire."

While it wasn't said to her, Ranma knew that after that last comment that she was dismissed. As she was about to turn and leave something Nemuu said on the way to the temple flitted across her memory, and she bowed to the Communicator, jingling the bells on her wrists, and then left the temple.

**End Flashback**

When he thought about it, the Communicator was an odd fellow. While what he told you wasn't really helpful, it did make you think and that helped you to come to your own conclusions. Ranma figured this was his way of helping the Haibane grow, but it didn't really help him yet as he still wasn't completely sure what the answers were. He felt a little closer though. A rush of charging steps broke him out of his thoughts.

"Ranma! Have you seen Kuu?!"

Kana was in the front of the group, which consisted of most of the Haibane in Old Home. It was she who spoke first. After the question was blurted out though, most of them grew red in the face and turned away. Ranma looked down at herself and with a sigh realized she was sitting there without anything on except a pair of boxers. Re-clothed within seconds, his voice brought the other Haibane to face him again.

"Not since we split up. She said she had something to do before she came back and took off into the woods almost an hour ago. Why?"

Kana and a few of the other Haibane paled. This news was apparently not welcomed. Kana broke through the rest of the Haibane and shot down the hall. "What's going on," asked Ranma, confused.

"It's Kuu," Reki said, more emotion on her face than usual. "Her Day of Flight has come."

Rakka and the other Haibane minus Reki and Ranma ran off to grab rain slickers. Ranma still looked confused though, so Reki helped him by elaborating. "The time comes for every Haibane when sheâ€|" she paused for a moment looking at him. "â€|or he must leave the nest. We call this the Day of Flight. When that time comes, the Haibane goes into the Western Woods, and are never seen again. Some say that they fly over the walls, but only those who have had their Day of Flight know for sure. Come on, everyone is leaving to go find her. If we can do that before she leaves, we might get to say goodbye."

"Goodbyeâ€|" Ranma said out loud. "Kuu said goodbye to me just before we split upâ€|" Pausing only a moment more, Ranma stood and went to grab a rain slicker and meet the search party in the courtyard.

The search was long, and fruitless. The pouring rain kept spirits both low and apprehensive. No matter how much they shouted for her, Kuu did not appear or respond to their calls. After what seemed like hours of searching, they came upon a small clearing. Within the

clearing were broken masonry and stone, causing it to look as though there were a small gazebo of marble that had been ruined many years ago. The group walked slowly to a low platform within the small ruin. Upon the platform were a few charcoal grey feathers, and a dim, lifeless, halo. The rain had stopped, and within the small clearing, a cry of anguish was the first sound to greet the calming clouds.

* * *

><p>A week had passed since Kuu's Day of Flight. Most of the Haibane were getting back into their routines and had finished feeling down about it. Part of this was due to Reki, who took the time to remind everyone that the Day of Flight was supposed to be a happy event, and they should be happy for Kuu, wherever she had gone to. Two of the Haibane however, would not be comforted.<p>

Rakka sat in Kuu's old room, holding a little figurine that had Kuu and her name on it. It was cute and small, and looked nothing like them, but it was the representation that she cherished. Kuu had been one of Rakka's greatest connections " a very good friend. But now she was gone, and Rakka didn't know what to do. She had been with them all for nearly a month, and then as suddenly as Rakka had arrived, Kuu had left them. Rakka wept, and held the figurine more closely.

Nabiki sat in her own room, pondering the whole thing. It was a week gone, but something in it hit her. Reki had talked before about the Day of Flight, so the concept wasn't new to her, but the real impact of it hadn't hit her until a Day of Flight actually happened. She wasn't as close to Kuu as most of the Haibane, but it wasn't the loss of one of their Feathers that hit home to Nabiki. It was the realization that it could happen at any time, and Reki had told her once that the Sinbound's Day of Flight never comes. When their time comes, it is much worse, and Nabiki was, for the first time she could remember, afraid.

It was just after dawn, and Ranma was going over his morning exercises. A hard workout has always been a good way to clear his mind, he found. Perhaps this is what he used to do as well to clear his mind. He allowed himself to become so deeply engrossed in his own thoughts that his awareness of the area slipped long enough for him to find himself fallen face-first into a puddle from the previous day's rainfall. It had rained a few times this week. For a moment she just lay there. _Does it matter? I'm still me._ And deciding to ignore the change, she finished her workout around the grounds.

Ranma had found and moved into a room two days ago. The nights were getting cold and he could no longer sleep outside at night without risking illness. The room he chose was right across from Nabiki's and was not nearly as nice, but Ranma felt no need for a nice room. Not when he preferred to sleep outside. The room was kept clean and maintained enough to know it wouldn't come crashing down on him, but other than that, it was not the kind of room the girls would have chosen to stay in. On the bright side, it was quiet, and Ranma found it a good place to meditate. A little hot water from the tap to put himself back into 'the form that my clothes fit best' and he sat down to begin some meditation before breakfast.

_So much time has passed, yet it feels like it has gone so fast.

First, Nabiki and I hatch from some large egg things, then we both grow wings out of our backs, and are given glowing rings for our heads. Haibane. Just what are we? Wings. All of us have them, but mine are different. Why so large? No one else has wings my size. One of the Young Feathers joked that as big as my wings are I could fly, but I can't. Or can I? Reki talked about the 'Day of Flight' as the day a Haibane leaves the nest by 'flying over the wall'. But if that's true why are my wings big now? Ugh, so much I don't know._

And then there's this curseâ€¦ The Communicator said the reason would come to me, but I still don't get it. None of the girls know either, but it's no surprise. They have never heard of it before either. The girlsâ€¦ There is Reki. She is the one who has been here the longest of the Haibane. She is probably the one to go to for answers since she told me that she has seen many of the Haibane leave. Then there is Kana. She is â€¦ well; I'm not sure what to call her. A firecracker? She loves to tease everything about me, and she took myâ€¦ strangeness the worst. I think though that she is starting to ignore them in light of recent events. Nemuu is a surprising girl. She seems very quiet and reserved, but if what Nabs says is true, she has a sense of humor that surprises you. Hikari feels familiar, like I may have known someone like her before, or maybe someone similar. Kind and with a ready smile. Kuuâ€¦ well, she's gone, but she taught me a lot about what it is like to be young inside no matter how old. She said that she learned how to be herself. Something there nags my mindâ€¦ Nabiki. Nabiki was with me before. I don't know how we knew each other, but that must be it. My memories of her before Old Home are so far gone that I only barely remember that we DID know each other. The communicator said though that I shouldn't think too much about my past. I guess whether or not I understand everything, it's the here and now I should focus on. He said the things I needed to remember would come back to me when I needed it or something like that. For now, that will have to do, I guess.

Opening his eyes, Ranma stood and left for breakfast. It was going to be another long day, learning from the children. Waitâ€¦ are the Young Feathers teaching me something?

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:<p>

Wow. That was a long time. I won't lie, I more or less put the story on hold while I went ahead to collect and watch the rest of both series in hopes I could understand more about them both. It took a while to get the rest, though I could have just watched it on a website I guess. Anyway, after that I totally forgot about this story for a while until one day I got a review! Not only did I get one, I got two in two days! Thanks guys! I also admit to having other stories I'm working on but haven't posted yet. Two of them are Original Works, so you may get to see them published one day! If so I'll let you all know which one it is. Also, a special thanks to Lightspire for his reviews. You make a valid point, so I am trying to work my stuff a little better. Bear with me though, some of the best works don't reveal all the whys and how things mesh together until later. I DO have reasons for everything now and a way to make it work, so have faith in me. I hope to update soon. Thank you all for your support!

6. What Dreams Reveal: Pt 2

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. The lyrics are graciously borrowed from the popular song by Evanescence. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

"â€¦" _**voices from past conversations echoing in your head**_

Thoughts

Haibane Ranma

The still, dead silence was the kind you would only expect in the deepest of winters when it felt as if even the earth itself seemed to hold its breath. It was the kind of silence that unnerves most people like the way a great ice storm does; everything around so completely silent that even your own voice shouted out seems to die within a few feet of your mouth. The only sound to be heard at all was the slow and steady rhythm of crunching snow as Ranma trudged on through the thickening forest. So lost in his mind, Ranma was only able to avoid natural obstructions like branches and small dips in the land because of his many years of martial training.

Why? Why did something like this have to happen? His life had always been hard, but this was becoming too much for the young man to take. He numbly plodded on, only vaguely aware of his destination.

"_**No! This cannot be! How in this world could something like this have happened to my baby girl?!***_"

Memories of the last few days flickered across his mind and vanished just as suddenly, forced down by the will of a young man still in great shock and denial.

"_**Imoutochan, please don't leave us!***_"

A twinkling image of a girl with long brown hair in a loose ponytail hanging over one shoulder, her once angelic face a twisted travesty of sorrow and deep grief.

"_**I am so sorry, everyone. I did everything I could, but she will not make it through the night. I wish I could tell you better news, but the best I can offer you at this point is that she might be able to hear you. I'll leave you all to say your goodbyes.***_"

A young man in a long white coat. Tears stained his cheeks and it was known to all that he did his absolute best.

Ranma continued to walk as images continued to torture his heart and mind. It was not much longer, as he had been walking for hours,

before he reached his destination. There, in a small clearing, was a tall sycamore tree. One of its branches had broken during a hard winter many years ago and had been hollowed out by some of the local fauna. His heart as cold as the ice and snow around him, Ranma reached into the small hollow and pulled out a tiny locket. The locket's design was a bit of an irony when it had been given. The silver snowflake pendant that dangled in the middle had reminded them both of the one who would wear it. _The greatest thing about being incased in ice is you'll never go bad._ The inscription on the back of the flake was just as tiny, but produced such a great smile from the girl when she had received it from him.

Looking down, Ranma pulled out and fingered his own locket. He had kept it under his shirt at all times and only ever took it out when he was certain he would not be seen. It was a small golden flame. _The best thing about your flame is how it melts my frozen heart._ A tear dropped from his face as he fell to his knees in the still silence of the snow-covered forest.

* * *

><p>Ranma bolted upright in his bed in Old Home. It had been nearly a month now since Kuu left them now. Rakka had become reclusive, and the other Feathers had been worried about her for quite a while now. After talking with them Ranma had learned that Rakka still hadn't gotten over Kuu leaving them all behind. Hikari called it 'finding closure'. Ranma wasn't the best with words, but he more or less understood what that meant. As for himself, Ranma had come to terms with the event and remembered that if they were all destined to go over the wall one day then he'd see her again. She was justâ€| scouting the new place or something. He was sure that just like when he came here to Old Home that Kuu would be waiting there to show him the ropes when he wentâ€| wherever Kuu was.<p>

For now though, this strange dream had completely unnerved him. It had been such a long time since he had any flashes of his past life that he had nearly forgotten them all. He had even come to the conclusion that his past didn't really matter and that he should look forward to the future and the life he had now. So why was he suddenly having memories come to him again? This wasn't fair, he was trying so hard to live for the here and now, and now this happens? _Why on earth is this happening again?! I don't want this; not now that things are getting to become so much betterâ€| Well, I might as well organize it and shove it in the back of my head, like usual. Let's seeâ€|_

Ranma deepened his breathing and began his meditation.

The walk in the woodsâ€| I think I've done that before, probably many times, but so sad? The locket in the tree was a present to someone - someone I was very close to. A girlfriend, maybe? I had a locket too that seemed like it was part of the pair. So she gave me one too then. Someone who also felt close to me. Hmmâ€| the memories that came and wentâ€| I think I was in a hospital, and there was someone dying. The girl who gave me the locket? That would figure, I don't think there was much happiness for me back then. My life is so much better now. I can't put much more together. Does it matter though? Should I ignore this like the Communicator said to?

Ranma opened his eyes and stretched luxuriously on his bed. It was

getting colder every day and he was very glad of his blankets at night. Winter it seemed had taken to making a sudden appearance instead of slowly peeking out onto the stage and making its presence known in a shy manner as Ranma was used to. His window was slightly frosted at the bottoms and corners of the window panes and he could see his breath in the air. There was a small heater nearby him, but it was broken and did him no good. The blankets however were very warm, thick wool, if a bit frayed from many years of use. With the first winter snows about to hit, the Haibane had each gone into town to obtain some winter coats. Ranma had insisted that Reki and he take the Young Feathers there early so they wouldn't catch cold. Reki hadn't figured on going so soon, but when Nabiki piped in with her own bit of logic, she finally relented to Ranma's wishes.

Nabiki seemed to have taken Kuu's departure harder than everyone else save Rakka, but she recovered within a few days. Still, she seemed different now than she usually was. Where the old Nabiki was a quick wit and kept a sharp tongue in making light of Ranma's mistakes and oddities, now she was more reserved, and that bothered Ranma quite a bit. It wasn't a bad thing for him to be on the receiving end of Nabiki's smart comments, but it felt as if Nabiki had lost a part of herself or something. That or perhaps she had just, like Ranma, come to realize that their time in within the walls of Glie _was_ limited. He would have to ask her sometime.

Thoughts of Nabiki brought back to the last thing she had said to him before breakfast the day Kuu left. _**"If this is your idea of professing your love to meâ€¦|""**_ Ranma considered this again. Sure he liked her, but love? Couldn't be, could it? As he was about to push that thought away it was as if the thought itself latched on to thoughts of his dream and made a connection. _Could that girl have been Nabiki? Could I have loved her before? NO! I was going to put all this behind me! I barely remember anything about her now! Why would I have loved her if it WAS her? Possible, I guess, but likely? With the way she teases me now you'd never know. â€¦|but then, she doesn't really remember her past either. She barely remembers anything about me. Even if we did have that kind of relationship in the past, we don't have that kind now, and I'm not willing to accept that we DID have that kind of relationship. I don't know if I want that kind with her. _A growling from his stomach brought him out of his reverie and though alone he gave a slight blush of embarrassment. _Thoughts for later._

"Time to see what's cookin'."

* * *

><p>Breakfast was a rowdy affair. The "Troublesome Trio" had been coming everyday now for almost two months. Ranma could barely remember a morning in Old Home without them there, and their little antics sometimes brought smiles to his face, and other times it caused his eyes to roll. He'd grown up a bit and while he still loved playing games with the Young Feathers (and did every day) Ranma had taken to try acting more like an adult when he wasn't actively playing with them. Today the antics fell to the eye-rolling as Daiku had 'accidentally' bumped his glass and doused Ranma's lap. The physical change that occurred had long since become so unremarkable and 'boring' to her, that Ranma barely noticed it other than the clothes she usually wore became uncomfortable with the extra weight pressing on the tops of her wings. As it was breakfast in the cold of

early winter, however, Ranma simply poured a little of her warm tea on a hand and proceeded to wipe his now less delicate looking appendage off with a table napkin.<p>

"Big sister-brother, what are we going to do today?" Hana asked in her little sing-song voice.

Wincing at the nickname the TT had taken to calling him, Ranma answered. "If we told ya that, it wouldn't be much of a surprise, huh? You'll just hafta wait and see."

A bit of whining on the part of the three Young Feathers went unremarked by the rest as the topic turned to Rakka's absence from the breakfast table.

"She still hasn't come around yet. I'm getting really worried," Nemuu said in her soft alto.

"You know what we need? We need to do something together!" Hikari's smile was a little too optimistic; as though she wasn't really sure it would work out that way.

"So what do you suggest," Nabiki asked. Hikari smiled. Nabiki didn't usually ask for opinions, she usually gave them. To have her ask for one made Hikari happy, though Ranma believed it was a little too fatalistic a question coming from her. Almost as if Nabiki didn't care to come up with her own idea. He didn't have long to think about this, however.

"Hey, it's getting colder, so we should make some wing covers," Hikari said as she walked into the little storage room to look for needle and thread.

"Do you even know how to sew, Hikari?" Kana sat on the bed now, having finished her meal. Reki had gathered up the dishes and was washing them with Nemuu.

"Well, I know a little. It's not like it's that hard you know."

Nabiki piped up at this. "If you only know a little I might be able to teach you a bit more. I've never done it, but I've been reading about it, and I think something as simple as a covering for our wings should be no problem." She sighed a little. _Probably wishes she could charge for it, but we don't use money. Might still ask for a favor in return though._ Ranma chuckled a little despite himself.

"What's so funny, Ranma? Think me sewing something is too girly for me? I know you must prefer a macho chick or something, but I AM a girl you know." Nabiki reached for the buttons of her shirt. "Need me to prove it?"

Ranma paled and started to stammer out refusals. Shorta and Daiku sat staring at Nabiki, or would have been if not for Hana's hands over each face. All mouths were open though. The moment however was both short-lived and quickly moved on from. During his momentary shock at Nabiki's brass behavior, the raven-winged Haibane had grabbed a cup from the sink and flung cold water from it at him.

"There. Now YOU can help sew too, if you think it's so girly."

Ranma muttered under his breath and there was some laughter from all present. About this time Rakka entered the room.

"Oh good! I'm glad you made it," Reki said as she wiped her hands. She walked over and joined the group now gathered near the bed. Rakka looked as shy as ever, but at least she was out and about now. Ranma gave a sigh of relief for that.

The girls were talking about making the wing covers and about the idea of having them all go with the same design when Ranma noticed one small problem with this. All of the Haibane's wings were no longer than their forearms, and while they were fully articulated, they didn't move around all that much, so the design Hikari had come up with was just fine with one exception. Ranma's wings were much bigger than the rest of theirs. Sharp as ever, he wasn't the only one to pick up on this.

"Hikari, I don't think Ranma's wings will fit that design," Nabiki stated almost flatly. "If you want to go with that design for the rest of us, that's fine. But I think Ranma is going to need something different. Something that can move a bit more so he won't tear it up."

Silence reigned for a moment as the girls all took in Ranma's wingspan. It was true. Most Haibane's wings could be folded in a bit, but the Haibane typically kept them straight as it was neither a bother nor a problem to do so. Ranma's wings, however, were usually kept folded indoors. Since he had gotten used to using them over the last two months, Ranma had taken to using them for lots of things, from parachuting from the top floor windows, to causing little gusts of wind to knock down Young Feathers in their games, and even going as far as to smack Daiku for not paying attention when the House Mother was speaking to them. No, Ranma's wing cover would need some other design and material.

"Well, I think I can sew these wing covers, but I'm not sure I know enough about sewing to make something more complicated than this," Hikari said a little sadly.

"I bet I know someone who could. I'll go see her today and ask about it." Nabiki then turned to Ranma. "You'll owe me one for this if it works, 'little sister-brother'."

Ranma scowled at her.

"Well, either way, we know Ranma's wings are much bigger, but I'll still need everyone else's measurements. Rakka, can I get yours first?"

Rakka nodded quietly and turned to allow Hikari access to her wings.

"Rakka! What happened to your wings?" Hikari took hold of one of them and fingered the fringe. "They're frayed! Have you been taking care of them?"

"Umâ€¦ I guess I haven't," Rakka said dejected.

"You should take better care of them; you are a girl after all."

Nabiki grinned at Ranma, who was still female. _Don't you dare say it,_ Ranma thought, still scowling at her.

"Rakka!" The exclamation snapped the two out of their eye-lock to look at Reki. She had lunged a little toward Rakka who looked suddenly scared. Before anything else could be either said or done though, Rakka ran from the room. "Ranma, I might be late today. They're all yours," and with that, Reki took off in pursuit.

After a moment more, Kana broke the silence. "What was that all about?"

"Dunno. I wouldn't worry about it much though. If its important Reki would let us know, right," Ranma asked the room.

"I guess," Hikari said cautiously. "I guess I'll make her wing covers myself then. But I don't know her size."

"Same size as Nabs here," Ranma said grinning retribution at Nabiki. "I'd just make one that size for her." Nabiki glared at the busty girl. Ranma's feminine features held a look of smug satisfaction.

"So, what ARE we doing today, big sister-brother?" Ranma's face fell at Hana's recurring question and Nabiki howled with laughter.

* * *

><p>"Reki said that, did she? Well then it's all up to you, young man. What I had planned for today was going to need her help with, but it can't be helped now." The House Mother sighed and sat down in a chair in the corner of the room they had converted into a pseudo-classroom so many years ago. Like much of Old Home it was a little dingy and obviously very old, but it had been spruced up a bit and cleaned, and while cracks and chips riddled the paint on the walls it had been kept in good repair.<p>

Ranma thought to himself. In the five or so weeks he had been working with the Young Feathers he had seen many things in their teaching. They had covered most of what he supposed were the basics for every Haibane, and because Reki was so knowledgeable about all things Haibane, there was very little he felt he could still teach them. Thankfully the Young Feathers were not yet in class, so Ranma still had about 20 minutes to come up with something. It wasn't going well for the long-haired young man, and it wasn't until the 20 minutes were nearly up that he finally had a brainstorm. _The children are going to need wing covers too. I can ask Hikari for help to teach them how and we can all make a big project over it!_ "I'll be right back. I have an idea, but I'll need some help from Hikari."

The older woman simply waved him on as he left the room to look for Hikari. _With luck, she'll still be in the guest room finishing up everyone else's wing covers_. Sure enough, as he burst into the room he found Nemuu, Kana, and Hikari all busy sewing wing covers. Hikari looked particularly focused.

"Hey, Hikari, you busy?"

Kana looked up at him incredulously. "Of course she is, can't you tell?" Ranma ignored her.

"Can you help me out today? I thought we could make a project with the kids and teach them how to make wing covers too."

Hikari stopped what she was doing and looked up at him. "It's not that I don't want to help, Ranma, but I have to hurry and finish this now because I have to get to the bakery soon. Kana could show you how though. She doesn't have to work today." Ranma looked at the wing cover Kana was working on and wondered if he shouldn't just take his chances 'winging' this. The pun in his mind made him laugh under his breath a little. Too bad for him, this laugh didn't go unnoticed by Kana, nor was it correctly interpreted.

"Oh shut it, Ranma. Like you could do better. I don't see why I should be doing this at all, since I suck at it so bad. I should just trade a favor to your girlfriend for something I can do well."

"She isn't my girlfriend! I barely know anything about her anymore."

"Sure, play innocent if you want, but I think you've thought about asking her out anyway. It wouldn't be the first time something strange happened to you, would it?" It was more a statement than a question. "Anyway, I may not be good, but at least I know how. Nemuu has work today as well, so if you are looking for help, I'm your best bet. You can repay the favor by taking the trash out while I get stuff for it."

Ranma grimaced. Kana sounded a lot like someone he thought he once knew, though he wasn't sure if he was right, as faded as his memories had become. Taking out the trash wasn't really much to ask for though, so he agreed. Only thing he hated about doing it was how the crows would stare at him with a look of betrayal in their eyes as he lit the fire to burn the refuse. _It's not like I'm a crow too, hoarding all of this stuff for myself. Go find your own food._ When he returned to the classroom he was surprised to see that the Young Feathers were all there and, for the first time he'd ever seen, all sitting quietly in a circle waiting for him. They were usually rowdy and hard to control in any sense of the word when there wasn't something actively being done in class, especially Daiku and Zu.

"Good morning Feather Ranma," the class called out in unison. _Okay, that's just weird._ Ranma leaned over to the House Mother. "Who are these kids?" The woman thumped him on the head. "Just because you've never seen it before doesn't mean they can't be well behaved. If you were here early every day instead of just a few minutes late you would know that they are like this every morning at the start of classes." Ranma wasn't sure he believed that. Not when all evidence he knew pointed to the contrary.

"Isn't this cute? Looks like 'big sister-brother' is finally getting the respect he thinks he deserves," Kana said overly sweetly as she stepped into the room, a large box in her hands. Ranma growled inwardly. _If the House Mother starts calling me that too, I'm leaving._

"At least I AM getting some," he said quietly so only Kana would hear. She scowled at him then forced a smile as he began to speak. "Alright, class, today we're gonna have a special project! I've asked Kana here to help us out today and she decided to do just that. As you know, winter is coming and even though we got ya some nice coats to help you stay warm we need to keep our wings warm too. So, Kana is going to help ya all to learn how to make wing covers!" Ranma started clapping his hands in childish excitement to elicit a similar response from the Young Feathers. _I feel stupid acting like this, but they seem to like it. _While the rest of the class cheered happily at the thought of not having to listen to some boring bit of Haibane lore or the like Ranma glanced to his side to see Kana staring at him as if he were some strange animal she had never seen before. "What?"

Kana shook her head as if to clear it and then addressed the Young Feathers, rolling up her sleeves in the process. "Alright, everyone ready?" A chorus of excited 'yeah's came from the boys and girls in the class and they began.

Kana it turned out was a great teacher, even if her own attempts at creating wing covers were less than attractive. The House Mother, however, had a steady hand, and was a great help in placing the marks for the holes that they would be sewing through. It was a very enjoyable time for all of them as they worked. Kana's biggest chore of the whole event was taking all those measurements. With twelve of them in the class it was a process that took a good two hours to complete, especially considering some of the wing covers had to be made twice for mistakes made. The biggest surprise for the event, at least to Ranma and Kana, was how well they were working together to accomplish the project with the kids. Both realized that they had never really worked much together before this, and although their attitudes towards each other were at best civilly abrasive, they could easily get along well when working together. It was as they were finishing up that Reki came in, carrying a tray of snacks.

"Snack time," she said with a smile. Their crafting heroes forgotten, the Young Feathers dashed over to Reki and the tray of sweetened delights. Reki gave a small sigh as she made her way to the table. Although she acted like she only barely tolerated her job helping the Young Feathers Ranma knew that she really did love it. The snack today turned out to be brownies that Reki had made herself. Everyone in Old Home loved Reki's brownies. They had a unique taste to them that only Ranma had been privy to learn of exactly what the ingredient was when Reki had asked for his help making them one day. A short distance north of Old Home was a tiny herb garden that Reki had been keeping since the Haibane whom had started it had left on her Day of Flight. Among the herbs were a few healthy sprigs of mint that Reki would pick fresh and shred into tiny pieces to add to the mix. It made for some very good brownies. Seeing Reki walk in with a tray of these masterpieces of desserts almost made her seem like a perfect homemaker. If not for the cigarette in her mouth, it would have been so. Taking matters into his own hands (and a pair of the scissors they'd been using moments ago) Ranma snuck up behind her and put his plan into motion.

"It looks much better like this," he whispered softly in her ear, and utilizing her stiff shock, snipped the tobacco filled part off at the butt, catching the smoking end in a small water-filled cup from the

sink. Ranma grinned to himself. _If there is one thing I've loved about playing with these kids, it's learning how to pull a good prank._ Kana started howling with laughter. Reki herself looked absolutely mortified.

"You should see your face! Hahahaha!" Kana fell to her knees and doubled over herself, so hard was her laughter. Reki blushed deeply from embarrassment and was only spared further humiliation by noticing that the Young Feathers at least were too preoccupied with the brownies to have noticed. Whipping her fist up into Ranma's face, she composed herself enough to fight the blush down and toss the useless butt into the trash. Kana laughed herself out of the room, finishing her time with them by telling them through laughs that it was the best morning off she'd had ever if only to see that last play between the two older Feathers.

"Honestly, I don't know why we put up with her sometimes. She can be as bad as these brats when she feels like it," Reki said.

"She's not that bad. She did help me out this morning and we all had a fun time. So, what was up with Rakka this morning?"

"Girl stuff. I wouldn't worry you with something like that."

Ranma shuddered. "Thanks for that." Just because Ranma could be a girl didn't mean he wanted to hear about that kind of stuff.

Reki looked over to one of the small tables they had been working at. "Wing covers," she asked nonchalantly.

"Yeah. I figured they should have some of their own. Turned into a great project, and they all had fun."

Reki looked at him quietly for a moment before saying, "You know... your language has gotten better than when you were first here. Cleaned up a bit, huh? It suits you better."

"Well, I'll keep working on it if you do something too, okay?"

Reki lifted an eyebrow. "And what do you want from me?"

Ranma pointed silently to the tobacco'ed paper-water cup in his hand. Reki got the hint. "Fine, I'll try. We'll both be trying to be better examples for the brats then." Ranma held out his hand and Reki reluctantly put in it the pack that held the last of her cigarettes. "Don't think I can't get more if I want to," Reki whispered to him.

"I won't stop you, but you did just give me your word," Ranma whispered back.

"Ass."

"And ****my**** language needs work?"

"Hey, big sister-brother?" _Oh Kami, now the other Young Feathers are starting to call me that. Kill me now._ It was Chidori, a girl whose name meant 'little bird' according to Hana.

"What is it, Chidori?"

"We all got to make wing covers, but what about you?" This caught the attention of the rest of the Young Feathers who were also curious as to how the large-winged boy was going to manage keeping his own wings warm.

"Your big sister Nabiki is going to look into that. She says she knows someone who might be able to help."

Losing interest after that, the Young Feathers finished their snacks and then sat down in a semi-circle as instructed by Reki, she herself sitting on a stool in the front. Ranma, at the request of little Chidori, sat at the bottom of the circle where Chidori and Hana started playing with his hair as they listened. Reki had decided to teach the Young Feathers about the Day of Flight this afternoon.

"All Haibane that are born into this world must one day leave it. We call this day the 'Day of Flight'. No one knows when their Day of Flight will come until the day it happens. Everyone will eventually have a Day of Flight and leave the Haibane Nests to go over the wall." Ranma felt Hana's hand jerk slightly but dismissed it out of hand. "There is not much else that is known about the Day of Flight, however. Those who know best are the Haibane who have already left us. As you all know, the only other creatures allowed over the walls are the birds, and it is said that they carry messages to and from the outside world. Whether you believe that or not, I don't know how to talk to the birds, so I don't know what message they carry for us. What we do know, though, is that when your Day of Flight comes, the Haibane goes into the Western Woods, and a light will shine from there to signify a Haibane's departure. We should all be happy when someone's Day of Flight comes, because they are allowed to go over the wall and see what is beyond it. No one really knows where it is that they go, just that they never return here. It is widely believed that we will see them again when our own Day of Flight comes, so there is no reason not to be happy for them. Any questions?"

Zu was first to raise his hand. "How long is it before your Day of Flight comes?"

Reki obliged. "The actual amount of time any Haibane has is different for each one. Kuu as you know left us recently, and she was only with us for a few short years. Nemuu on the other hand has been here for more than seven years, and I not much less time than that."

"Did Kuu leave early because she was better than us," asked a boy a few places to Ranma's left.

"No, and don't any of you ever think that. We all knew Kuu, and she had faults of her own. Her time just came quickly."

A sudden *flump* on his right shoulder caught Ranma's attention. He looked down to see that Chidori and Hana had tied his hair into a pigtail. Ranma sighed.

* * *

><p>A few more questions were asked before classes were dismissed for the day and the Young Feathers went out to play - all of them except for Hana, who stayed behind.<p>

"Reki? Can I ask you something?" Hana looked down at her shoes and seemed very nervous. Ranma continued to clean up but was listening. He too was supposed to be there to help the Young Feathers after all. Reki nodded for her to continue. "What is going to happen to Nabiki?" Ranma froze. Images flashed in his mind from his dreams that morning.

"What do you mean, Hana?"

"Well, you were telling us about the Day of Flight, and how all Haibane will have one. But that isn't what you told Nabiki when she first came here."

Ranma's head turned slowly to look at them both.

"You were listening in on that conversation? I told you it's not good to eavesdrop on people, Hana! You should have let us know you were there. Private conversations are supposed to be private."

"Wait, Reki. I want to hear this," Ranma said coolly. "What about Nabiki's Day of Flight?"

"Reki said that Nabiki was a bad Haibane and that she was going to go to hell or something like that."

If Ranma's gaze could burn, Reki would have felt like she was in hell.

"Explain."

Reki sighed and sat on a stool. "This shouldn't take too long, but stay here, Hana. I want to make sure you understand this too." Reki reached for the pocket she kept her cigarettes in only to remember that Ranma had them. Although she really wanted a drag right now, especially in light of what she was about to talk about, she figured she owed Ranma this one. _Shame I can't make Hana pay for this, but she's just a brat and doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut._

"I didn't say Nabiki was going to hell, she did. That day you and the others went to town to get clothes for the two of you and Nabiki stayed behind we had a talk. It was about her wings. Understandable, since we've never seen a Haibane born with purely black wings. I myself had black spotted wings, but they weren't completely black. I wanted to talk her through it a bit so she would know what to expect. Few of the Haibane here know what black wings mean, or at least, few of them fully appreciate what it means." Ranma nodded for her to go on. "It is said that the haibane who are born with black in their wings are Sinbound Haibane. The Sinbound are those haibane who will never find peace. Their dreams are nightmares, and their Day of Flight never comes. What happens to them after that, no one knows. No one knows what happens to any haibane after the time for their Day of Flight, but it is certain it isn't pleasant for the Sinbound. They say that the Sinbound are born that way because of something from their past, but no one really knows. It could be just that luck was not on our side and that someone had to be born this way. There is too much that we don't know about the Sinbound. I offered to give Nabiki a dye for her wings that would make them grey, but she refused my offer. In the same way we know very little of why the Haibane exist, we know little of why some Haibane are born Sinbound and

others not."

Ranma thought hard on this. _If this is true, then Nabiki is going through her own hell right now, let alone where she is going to go after this. Reki says she is Sinbound too, but she seems so happy here. Maybe both of them are just showing a good face to all of us. But wait, if it DOES have something to do with our pasts, maybe I can help her? There must be some way a Sinbound Haibane can be redeemed, right? If so maybe knowing more about the past can help our futures. No! I was told not to think about these things! I want to move on! Why does it feel like Kami-sama doesn't want me to let go and move on?! Why must Fate toy with me like this?! It's maddening!_

"Reki, can a Sinbound Haibane become unbound by sin? You know, be forgiven or something?"

"I believe so, Ranma. I do not know how though. The Haibane Renmei say call it the Circle of Sin. I don't really understand what it means myself. The Haibane Renmei say a lot of things, and rarely in a way that we don't have to try to decipher it. It's very annoying really. Before you get it into your head though, Ranma, if there IS a way for a Sinbound Haibane to become a Blessed Haibane, it has to be done by themselves. I can't say there is anything you can do if you are concerned about Nabiki. I can only say that I believe it is possible though because I also believe in the reverse; that a Blessed Haibane can become Sinbound."

* * *

><p>Nabiki walked towards her room in Old Home. She was in a better mood than she had been in weeks. Haruka had listened to her problem and while not as sympathetic to it as she'd hoped her to be, had given her advice on a light, flexible material that could be used for Ranma's wing covers and was even able to supply enough scraps to make a pair. Nabiki was carrying the pile of cloth to her room when she turned the corner and bumped into someone.<p>

"Sorry about that," a voice said. It was Ranma.

"Meh. I don't think either of us were watching where we were headed, little sister-brother," Nabiki quipped at him. _Not even a reaction out of him. What's got him so upset?_ "Hey, you okay Ranma? What's with the hair?"

"Why didn't you tell me," Ranma asked quietly, still on the floor.

"Tell you what?"

"Why didn't you tell me what your black wings meant?"

_Where did this come from? _"I don't see how my wings are your business, Ranma. I can clean them and take care of them like the rest of the Haibane here, except maybe Rakka. And Hikari said this morning that she'd make my wing covers while I was out so I could go to town to get information on how to make ones big enough for your sorry butt." _I suppose I could have handled that better, but what is up with him?_

"You know what I meant, Nabiki."

Nabiki's anger started to boil inside and she fought hard to keep her composure. "What did you want me to say, Saotome? 'Oh woe is me, I'm a sinner and I'm going to go to hell because my feathers are as black as pitch! Kami have mercy on me! Oh wait, my wings are black, so He won't. Boo hoo hoo.' Think about it. Why should I have to tell you about my problems? They are mine, not yours!" Nabiki started to make her way past him, the discussion over in her mind.

"They ARE my problems too, Nabiki!" She stopped at this, bristling inside. "I told the Communicator that I would help the Haibane of Old Home, and I am doing my best to do just that! How can I help people though if they won't tell me what is wrong?"

Nabiki whipped around sharply and glared at him.

"I did not ask for your help nor do I want it. You aren't a Samurai of old, Ranma, and it is not your duty to solve everyone's problems. If you believe that your goal in life is to do that, then consider me your first failure. And remember, Ranma, you can't expect to solve other people's problems if you can't solve your own. If you believe you don't have problems to solve and are ready to solve mine then you DO have a problem, a BIG one." And with that, Nabiki left him in the hallways to go to her room.

* * *

><p>Nabiki flopped onto her bed, the adrenaline from the confrontation she had with Ranma draining from her, taking her energy with it. It had been such a good morning too. Then that jerk Ranma had to ruin it by bringing this up. After all her efforts to get over Kuu's Day of Flight and how painfully it reminded her that she may never get to have one before her time was up, Ranma had to bring it all crashing down around her again. It wasn't fair that he could so easily tear down the walls she placed to guard her heart, which had been cut so deeply from the start. There, laying on her bed, covered with the materials for Ranma's wing covers, Nabiki cried herself to sleep.<p>

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: Again, wow. It's amazing how the story takes off on its own once you are really into typing it. It's like I stop writing the story and it starts writing it's self, dictating to me as I write someone else's story. I will take just a moment to address two reviews I got from the last chapter. XStylus, thank you very much for sticking with this story. Rejoice in knowing that you WILL get to see Nabiki and Ranma's Day of Flight. I already have that part written out. To Sovetskycapitalist (long name, bud) I know I sent you an e-mail about it but I'm going to address it here too. No, martial arts are not going to play a role in my story. For what I have planned for Haibane Ranma it would just detract from it. You are more than welcome to send me an Omake if you'd like however and I will post it in the next chapter. I'd love to read your idea on it. Thank you all, my loyal readers! I look forward to hearing from you as much as you look forward to chapter 7. I hope to get that one out before Christmas too. Oh, and before you flame me on this, Lightspire, I haven't forgotten. All is going according to plan. ^_~ b<p>

7. The Snowdrop Locket

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. The lyrics are graciously borrowed from the popular song by Evanescence. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

"â€|" _**voices from past conversations echoing in your head**_

Thoughts

Haibane Ranma

The concept of dawn is a curious thing. For many of us it represents a new day with limitless possibilities. There is a special beauty in watching the sun rise in the morning and feeling that today is going to be better than yesterday; that after the previous day's mistakes we can improve and live life even better. It is an inspiring experience, and for Haibane Ranma, this marvelous view was only marred by the thought, _'with my luck, it will be a new chance to make different mistakes instead. This sucks.'_ Well, we can't be optimistic all the time.

Ranma sat on the roof of the northern dormitory of Old Home, watching the sun finish its climb above the horizon. His night had not been a pleasant one. He had gone to talk to Reki about his confrontation with Nabiki. He found, to his embarrassment, that most of Old Home heard the main point of their argument and Reki's advice began with a slap to his face. After talking with her about it he knew that it was a slap he very well deserved. It was a miserable time at dinner after that. The other girls were not as vocal in their disappointment in him, but silence has its own way of being loud when you _know_ you are in the proverbial dog house. The best he was able to manage out of the whole affair at dinner was Hikari saying, 'yes, you should,' when he suddenly cried out, 'fine, I'll apologize to her'.

Sleep that night didn't come easy though, and he woke up before dawn. Thinking of little better to do he ran through his morning workout and that led to where he was nowâ€| cold and frustrated on top of a three story roof above his bedroom. Or maybe it was above the hallway between his room and Nabiki's, he wasn't sure. The calming effect of the sunrise wasn't lost on him, however, and he began to finally relax his mind and consider how to go about apologizing to the girl whom had offered to make custom wing covers for him only 24 hours ago.

_I guess I could just go for the direct approach. Just go up to her and tell her I'm sorry. If I do that though, it may not really be enough. The girls said that it's better to put thought into an apology. Does that mean I should do something special with it? I'm no good at mushy apologies. Kana said girls like to be made to feel like they are special to a guy when he apologizes, but after all that last night no one told me how to best do it. _Ranma mentally chuckled.

Nabiki said I was not a Samurai of old. Good thing, too. I doubt I could pull off something as embarrassing as dressing up in samurai garb and spouting poetry or something. Even if I thought I could, I don't have a good katana to hold on to while I did it, so I'd have to use some stupid stick or something. No, that's a bad idea and I'm not even going to try. It'd probably get me more laughs than I could wish for. I guess I could give her something to try to make it up to her, but what would she like that I could offer? Maybe a flower. Yeah, I'll give her a flower and say I'm sorry.

With his mind made up Ranma spread his wings and parachuted down to the ground next to the tree which had provided shelter for Nabiki's cocoon so many weeks ago. The cocoon had finally been cleared away and the only evidence it had been there was the disturbed area of earth that the cocoon had cracked and torn as it grew. Ranma looked around for a flower, but couldn't find any in the immediate area. After a moment's reflection he remembered that Reki's herb garden was near a flower patch that Kuu used to keep. Ranma doubted anyone had gone to tend it since she left, but perhaps there would still be some flowers there that he could use.

Upon arriving at the flower patch in question, however, Ranma came upon the harsh reality that this close to winter there wouldn't be any of the flowers planted here in bloom. _Figures. _Some of the flowers that had been here were beautiful and in full bloom when he arrived in Old Home but with the first snows about to fall it should have been obvious to him that they would not be in bloom now. He found a few blooms that still had petals but they looked so miserable that he worried using them might insult her. _I guess I'll just have to go and tell her without a gift and hope she will hear me out._ Resolved in his mind he gathered himself up off the hardened dirt and headed in to find some breakfast.

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Reki stood near the oven, finishing up a new batch of flapjacks and bacon. It had been a calm and peaceful morning so far. Most of the others had come to eat as was usual and the air held a calming nature in its gentle motion through the room as the girls bustled about. Compared to the tension of last night it was certainly a very calm morning. Even better, Ranma had stopped crowing in the mornings and that made for less annoyance. _Ever since Kuu left us Ranma has started to really mature. It's like he had the chance to live out some of his childhood again and now he's becoming the adult he looks to be. I'm glad for him. I hope Rakka will also come out of her shell more. I know from experience how hard it can be to lose someone you always thought would be there._ Reki's mind drew back into the events from yesterday with Rakka.

**Flashback**

Reki found Rakka in her room after chasing her from the Guest Room a few minutes ago. She was sure she had just seen Rakka's feathers starting to gain specks of black in them, and the specks were spreading. This didn't make any sense, but Reki had a commitment to help every New Feather that came to Old Home and she would not

abandon any of them; especially not if what she feared was true. While the implication that a Blessed Haibane like Rakka could suddenly become Sinbound intrigued her it was not something that was a cause for celebration. Only... if it was true, and one could 'switch sides of the coin' as it were, then perhaps the reverse really was also true? The Communicator had told her as much before when she had asked about the Sinbound, but the riddle he gave her was so hard for her to understand that she wasn't even sure he was telling her the truth in the first place. This new revelation gave Reki a little hope, but it was only a little. _If not for Nabiki obviously being Sinbound I think I might have found more comfort in the idea that I am not the only Sinbound one here anymore. Nabiki was Sinbound from birth, though, so Rakka's transformation makes me wonder if it can be done â€" if the Sinbound really CAN find redemption. Still, even if it can be done, the Communicator made no sense when he tried to explain it to me._

Reki knocked on the door to Rakka's room and entered after receiving no reply. Rakka sat in the corner, facing away from the door. She was slumped there sniffing quietly, a pair of scissors near her hand and the reason for the frayed feathers all over the floor. She had been snipping off the blackened parts of her feathers.

It had taken the better part of the morning talking with Rakka to comfort her and convince her that she hadn't done anything wrong â€" that she was a good Haibane, and that this was nothing to worry so much about. After much consolation Reki retrieved some medicine from her room and used it to start dying Rakka's feathers back to grey. The process took time, but it was worth it to Reki to help Rakka's peace of mind. When all was said and done Rakka seemed to feel better, but Reki knew that things would probably be difficult for the poor girl until after winter passed. Rakka's emotions would be very fragile for a while, and Reki wanted to be sure that the unstable girl had the support she needed through this time. Ranma's outburst in the hallway last night had not gone over well with any of them, least of all Rakka. _I know I shouldn't have been so hard on him, but saying that last night nearly destroyed everything I tried to do for Rakka. He still has a lot of maturing to do after all, but at least he is making a startâ€" I think._

**End Flashback**

"Hey Reki, don't burn it. I like my bacon crisp, but not to a crackling crunch," Kana said peering over her shoulder. Reki looked at the quickly blackening food in the fry pan on the stove. Much to Kana's disappointment she didn't yelp or panic, she just sighed and forked the crunchy ruins out and into a separate bowl. _Ranma will probably still eat it. He's not picky._ The thought made her frown again. "What's got you so down," Kana asked.

"It's nothing important. I was just thinking about Ranma's outburst."

Kana frowned too at this. "The jerk needs to learn that some things just aren't said. It's like asking a girl how much she weighs. It's a big 'no-no'."

Reki laughed lightly. "I suppose it is. I don't mind telling people my weight, but I don't want to be asked." Reki looked back at the table. "Hey, where did Nabiki go?"

"She headed off to town again. Probably to talk to that Haruka lady she's been seeing for so long. I swear she's been seeing her so long I'm sure she'll pop the question any day now. It's just as good though. Ranma is no longer on the roof, so I'm sure he'll be in here any minute now and I don't think Nabiki is ready to talk to him."

As if saying his name were a summons, Ranma walked into the room.

"Hey guys! What's up?"

Kana spoke in mock offense. "Hey, just because you can pick to be a guy or a girl doesn't mean we can! You should address us properly."

"Oh you know what I meant, get off." Ranma looked around the room. "Nabiki sleeping in?"

Hikari answered him with a little sharpness to her voice. She was obviously still upset with him. "She left early to go into town. She probably won't be back until late, so I wouldn't wait around for her."

Ranma slouched a bit in disappointment.

"Hey Ranma, try these," Reki said, shoving the bowl of burnt offerings into his chest. Ranma took the bowl and looked at it blankly before looking up at her. He tried to speak, a question on his face, but he paused for a moment first.

"What's with the toothpick?"

Reki paused. _Not the question he first had, I bet._ Reki had taken to keeping a toothpick in her mouth since Ranma had made her promise to quit smoking. The need for nicotine was driving her nuts and the lack of something in her mouth had brought this solution into play. The feeling of the toothpick wasn't as fulfilling as the thickness and give that the cigarette had, but it was something at least.

"_Someone_ made me promise not to smoke anymore, so give me a break you health nut."

Reki turned and grabbed a pitcher of juice from the table and poured herself a glass. Kana had offered to make the juice this morning, which was one less thing to frazzle her nerves. Reki nearly choked when she started drinking it though.

"Kana, what is this," Reki spat.

"It's grapefruit juice. Master says it's good for you and 'it will help her succeed'. I'm not sure how a drink is supposed to help you stop smoking though."

Odd. My craving for a cigarette is gone. I'm not sure it's worth this taste though. "I wish you had warned me. This stuff tastes awful."

"'The best medicines taste bitter', so drink up!" Kana had way too

muchâ€| smugness in her voice for Reki's comfort. _Use my own quote on meâ€|_

Nemuu took the silence to speak up. "So Ranma, what are you going to do today? The House Mother said to let you know you had the day off. _I_ think it's to let you cool down a bit."

Ranma either missed the slight or ignored it. "I'm not sure yet." He thought about it for a moment and then spoke again. "I think I'll head in to town to find something I can use as a gift. You know, to make peace with Nabiki."

He IS becoming more mature. That's good. I hope he picks something good out for her. Even used items can look new if you're careful and clean them up.

"Good for you, Ranma. Best of luck finding something she'll like." Reki gave him a smile and went back to the bacon she had put on the fryer. They had burned again. _Damn._

* * *

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The town of Glie was quieter than Ranma remembered. The cold had apparently made a difference in the amount of time people spent outdoors. There were still plenty of people around, just not as many as usual. Ranma walked the streets thinking about the gift he wanted to give to Nabiki as a peace offering. _I can't buy anything new, I'm not allowed. But where do I go to find this?_ He walked the streets for almost an hour before a sign hanging over a shop door caught his eye. Yoshi's Antique Emporium was written next to a badly painted picture of a ring and necklace. _Bingo._

Ranma walked into the store and started looking around the cases near the register. There were rings, pendants, earrings and necklaces of all shapes and sizes. Most of them, Ranma was sure, would be too gaudy for a girl like Nabiki. Nabiki seemed more the kind to enjoy delicate jewelry if any at all, so it needed to be small. A man cleared his throat from behind the counter Ranma was looking in.

"Strange to see one of you Haibane in here. I think the last one of you to come in was a young girl with a blonde ponytail and glasses. Bought an old broach from me, she did. Named Hikaru or something."

"Hikari?"

"Yeah, that's it. That was over a year ago I think. Nice girl, love to see her again."

"Why is it so strange to see a Haibane in your shop, old man?" Ranma slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Old man, am I?" The elderly gentleman laughed loudly. "That's what I like about you young people. Honest to a fault. I may be old, but my wife still loves me. Thinks it's funny to see just how much more skin

I've grown by grabbing some of it and stretching it away from these old bones. Want to see?"

Ranma inwardly recoiled at the thought. "No, I'm good."

The man guffawed again. "Well now. Are you looking for something specific?"

Ranma considered this. He hadn't been looking for anything specific, but memories of his dream the previous day brought him back to the snowflake locket. The memory was thankfully fading, but it was still sharp enough to remember the pair of lockets. While he didn't think he had a shot at this sudden idea, what could it hurt?

"Do you have a locket shaped like a snowflake?" Ranma dared to hope.

"A Snowdrop Locket? I might still have a few. Them's a favorite in the wintertime as gifts, but them Toga rarely bring any with them. I'll look for you though. I'll check the back while you check the rest of what I got out here, eh?" The man turned and walked into a room in the back of the shop. Ranma's heart started to beat a little faster at the hope of getting a Snowdrop Locket. He started searching frantically through the displays and the boxes of loose jewelry. There were none to be found in them. His hopes started to wane when the elderly man's voice came from the back.

"Ah, here we go!" Ranma's heart leapt! The man came out of the back holding a long wooden rod with a small claw shape on the end of it. "Been wonderin' where I put this." The man began using the back scratcher and Ranma nearly dropped to the floor.

"You were supposed to be looking for a Snowdrop Locket," Ranma nearly pleadedâ€| only nearly though.

"I was and I found one. I gots two of them, so take your pick." The man, probably Yoshi, carefully set two lockets on the counter in front of him. "Here you go. Them's there is the Snowdrop Locket. Let me know if you want one."

Ranma picked them both up. Neither one of them looked quite like what he had imagined them to be, but he was sure they were close. The silver casing was tarnished and one of the chains was damaged on it. The other one bore an inscription on the back that said, 'To my darling Lianna with love'. That cancelled that one out, so he'd had to take the other one.

"Can I swap the chains, old man?"

"Sure you can, I think you know how, don't you? Yoshi may be old, but he hasn't lost his touch. Who's the lady?"

Ranma staggered. Why did everyone assume things about him? "Uhâ€| it's a peace offering for a friend of mine. I kinda said something stupid and it made her mad."

Yoshi smiled warmly, and then put his hand over Ranma's own. "There is an inscription on the other one; would you like me to inscribe something on this one? Old Yoshi did the same to the other, but he returned it a few days later. Guess she didn't like it." Ranma didn't

even hesitate.

"Could you inscribe, '_The greatest thing about being incased in ice is I'll never go bad' _on the back?"

Yoshi looked at him oddly. "What a strange thing to say, but I guess it holds some special meaning to you, so I'll do it. It will take a few minutes." Taking the locket in his gnarled hands Yoshi sat on a stool and got to work with his inscribing tools. Ranma worried at first that the aged man would not be able to make a good inscription, but it turned out that Yoshi had a well practiced hand and the writing was beautifully written. The calligraphy style of the inscription looked extremely professional.

"There you go, young man. I trust its good enough for you. Oh, hang on. I've got something to clean it up a bit." Yoshi took a moment to clean the tarnish off and when he held the cleaned and inscribed jewelry to him it looked almost new, if not for a few scratches. Ranma smiled at the wizened man.

"Thanks a lot, I won't forget this." Ranma bowed low to the man, spreading his wings wide for extra effect. Yoshi grinned.

"I'm sure she won't either. Now get out there and romance your lady before she decides to _stay_ mad, eh?" With that the man reached over the counter, grabbed Ranma by the shoulder, and pushed him toward the door. His grip was surprisingly strong. Out in the cold air Ranma thought about that then remembered something else. _Oh, right!_ Ranma grinned to himself. He stepped back out into the cold after a moment inside and left in search of the shop the girls said Nabiki frequented.

* * *

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Yoshi smiled when he returned from the back room to find a leaf torn from a Haibane Renmei notebook on the counter. Upon closer inspection he found a note added to it that read, 'May your skin keep stretching.' Yoshi laughed harder than he had in years. _My wife is going to love this._

* * *

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A bell jingled from above her as Nabiki entered Haruka's shop. Nabiki looked up at it. _That's new. Probably put it there to warn her when I come in._ It was still early in the day, probably around nine o'clock or so. A clock on the wall verified the time at 9:12am. The shop had been open for about a quarter of an hour then. Haruka walked out of the back and greeted Nabiki civilly when she saw it was her. Visiting her regularly for almost two months hadn't really brought them to any kind of strong friendship, but Haruka had at least lost the hostile enmity that was there in the beginning. Nabiki wouldn't call her friendly, but they at least had some kind of good rapport

with each other. It was the kind of relationship that was on the verge of friendship, but something was missing that needed to be done to finally give it that push over the line that had been drawn.

"Good morning, Haruka. How's the new design coming along?" A few days ago Haruka had shown Nabiki a new clothing design she was working on. It was learning that Haruka also designed her own styles that brought Nabiki to ask yesterday for tips on making Ranma's wing covers. Remembering Ranma was not something Nabiki wanted to do right now, so she pushed the thoughts back into a corner and viciously stomped on them.

"Not as well as I'd hoped. I've got most of it finished, but there is something missing. Would you like to see what I have so far?"

Nodding her answer, Nabiki sat down on a stool near a large table that was used to cut bolts of cloth. It wasn't long at all before Haruka wheeled out a dummy that she used to hang clothing to be tailored on. It was wearing an interesting design that Nabiki hadn't seen before. It was a dress, but much more— high-class than anything she had seen before. There were three layers to it, and it had both embroidery and scrollwork on it. While it was a beautiful piece, Nabiki doubted anyone in town would ever wear it. Even if they did, what would they wear it to? The town wasn't large enough to really have different social classes, and most people in the town dressed plainly. Nabiki was given the go ahead when she asked Haruka if she could touch it. The materials were nothing that Nabiki was not familiar with. They were wool and linen mostly, and the material itself was nothing fancy. The way she put them all together was quite a masterpiece in its own right, even if it wasn't to her personal tastes.

"It's not my style, Haruka, but I think you may be on to something here. It looks really good. I'm not sure who would wear it though or why. Not in this town anyway. Maybe people outside the walls would wear something like this, I don't know."

Haruka seemed almost embarrassed. "A friend of mine lent a book to me and there was something like this in it. I wanted to see if I could make something close to it. I guess it looks more like some festival costume though." Haruka sighed. "Oh well. It is still fun to work on."

The two of them talked for a while as they worked together on the dress. Nabiki gave some suggestions here and there and they spent a good deal of time comparing the merits of different materials. After some time the topic brought up a topic Nabiki did not want to talk about.

"How did those wing covers turn out, by the way?" The question was innocent enough, and Haruka asked it more in passing, not expecting much more of an answer other than 'good' or 'okay' or maybe at most a little info about what they were like. Nabiki's response though was certainly unexpected. She tensed up and almost tore the piece of cloth she had been holding.

"I— didn't make it yet. I'm not sure I want to." Nabiki was looking down toward the floor and couldn't see Haruka's face well through her

bangs. Nabiki felt her heart clench. She wasn't sure if it was anger or what, but it wasn't a feeling that she liked. Haruka picked up on the mood.

"What happened?"

The emotions that bore themselves ranged from glad satisfaction to anger to sorrow as Nabiki explained what had happened the previous day. The first were the good feelings that she was going to be doing something that really made her finally feel at least a little needed in Old Home. In all the time Nabiki had been in Old Home she had never once really felt like her presence was needed by anyone there. Hikari brought home fresh baked foods from her job at the bakery. Nemuu played with the Young Feathers occasionally and told them stories at the Library every week. Kana was able to repair the clock tower, though it isn't quite finished at least progress is being made. Reki and Ranma both cared for and taught the Young Feathers. Rakka was the only other one who didn't seem to really have much of a purpose there, but she had become so reclusive over the last month that Nabiki didn't even want to entertain the idea of confiding her problem with her. In the end, it was a rare joy that she was given the opportunity to do something useful that made her feel needed for a change.

"Well, it's like this. After I left your shop with the scraps you gave me yesterday I went back home to let them all know that I had not only gotten some advice, but the materials to make them for Ranma. Your help was greatly appreciated, by the way. On my way to my room I sort of bumped into Ranma, and he wasn't happy."

Haruka didn't understand this and it showed on her face. "Why wasn't he happy? He should have been thankful you were willing to make him anything at all. A month ago I wouldn't have even bothered."

Nabiki put that last bit of information aside for now. "Well, it seems as though he found out the meaning behind my wings being black, and it really upset him. I don't know why, it's not like it is any of his business. It's not like I chose to be Sinbound."

"Sinbound? What do you mean by that, Nabiki?"

Nabiki sighed. "The black feathers mean I am a Sinbound Haibane. I still don't understand much about it, but the gist of it is simple enough. After a Haibane has been here for so long they have what we call the Day of Flight. That's when the light shoots up from the forest west of here. This is when a Haibane goes over the wall. The _Sinbound_ Haibane, on the other hand, does not get a Day of Flight. They just, go to hell or something. Ranma confronting me about it was a real dampener on my spirits. It is painful to be reminded that I'm going to go to hell soon. I don't need him freaking out over itâ€| not when it has nothing to do with him. The Blessed Haibane don't need to worry about _my_ problems."

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Haruka was at a loss for words. After a moment's pause she continued

her work while trying to soak this all in. _It is a real shock, to hear this girl talk like this. I've always thought of the Haibane as girls and boys who were so pleased with their wings and their halo as if they were angels in God's waiting room. I've never thought that there could be some that were cursed like this._ The hem of the dress was nearly finished when she spoke again.

"When I was a little girl, I used to adore looking at the Haibane. I would have skipped down the streets with my mother and sister as happy as could be had we seen one. My father used to tell us that if you met a Haibane in town and they waved to you that you would have good luck that day. I believed him too. I used to dream about what it would be like to be a Haibane. I'd imagine having wings myself and a halo over my head. That was how I got interested in making clothes, actually. I wanted to one day make for myself a pair of wings I could wear on my back. They wouldn't be real of course, but I could wear them and pretend to be a Haibane just like the ones I saw in town. I was going to open my own shop one day and donate clothes to all the Haibane, because I thought it was so sad that they always had to wear second-hand clothing. But then I actually met a Haibane for the first time when I was six, and it was not at all what I expected.

"The Haibane was a girl, but I don't know where from. I didn't know until you told me that there was more than one nest for the Haibane. She was tall with long red hair, and she strutted around like she was the most important thing in the world. When I waved to her, hoping she would wave back, she looked at me and then sniffed loudly and stuck her nose up at me. My image of the Haibane shattered and ever since I believed that the Haibane were stuck up peacocks who believed they were 'blessed' to be greater than all of us. My sister did not agree with me only because she wasn't there and hadn't seen it. My whole family told me I was wrong, but I had seen it happen and I couldn't get her attitude out of my head. I have lived here hating the Haibane for more than twenty years and refused to allow any of them to work with me. When you came along and gave me much the same attitude the first time we met I felt my suspicions were well founded, but instead of scaring you away you just kept coming back. It was annoying, really. You kept trying to get to know me though, and I think in the end you were not a bother anymore but I still didn't want to be your friend because I still deep down thought you were what I had thought all Haibane were. I'm sorry."

Nabiki was speechless. Haruka knew that she didn't talk much to the little bit- noâ€| the Sinbound Haibane when she visited her. Usually she was fairly curt and left her conversations more reactive than proactive, generally keeping it to short answers to questions or quick comments about something the girl said. Haruka didn't expect to be forgiven for her attitude, but patiently waited for a response.

"So, that is why you hated me for so long; because of some grudge you held against someone else long ago?"

Haruka sighed and lowered her head. "Yes, that's why I've not been very nice. It wasn't your fault, but old grudges are hard to shed. I still do not really know much about the Haibane â€" who does, really â€" but I thought perhaps we could be friends now?" Haruka held out a hand a little nervously. She beamed like the little girl she used to be when Nabiki took it.

"I would like that. I really would."

Haruka pulled her arm inward still holding Nabiki's hand in hers and gave the startled Haibane a quick hug. It was a good feeling to know that her prejudice against the Haibane was unfounded. It was stupid, really, how she had spent so many years believing that all the Haibane were like that first one she met. It was also a great surprise to find that not all Haibane were 'living the good life'.

"Now," Haruka said, breaking the hug, "about Ranma—| no, hear me out on this. I am older than you and therefore I have had more time in my life to make mistakes, so I can probably help you."

Nabiki rolled her eyes, but acquiesced.

"I think I know why Ranma was so upset. Imagine for a minute that you had a sister or very best and dear friend. Now imagine that one day from out of nowhere you found out from someone else that your friend or sister was going to be locked away forever from you for something they couldn't help. How would you feel to know that your friend or sister knew about this and didn't tell you?"

Nabiki thought about this. "If it was my friend, I'd be upset. If it was my sister, I'd be furious."

"The closer you are to someone, Nabiki, the more betrayed you feel when you discover something like this. It's just like how I felt toward the Haibane for so long. My image of them was betrayed. Granted my feelings were more an obsession than closeness, but to a young child the two are much the same."

"So what you are saying," Nabiki asked for clarity, "is that Ranma was so upset because he feels close to me? He doesn't know me as well as you might think."

Haruka smiled patiently. "You don't need to know someone deeply to care about them as deeply as he seems to care about you. Do this for me, okay? I want you to think for a moment of everything he has done for or with you and then tell me to my face that you don't think he cares deeply for your well-being. If you can do that firmly enough that I can believe it, then I won't disagree with you. Good luck convincing me though."

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Nabiki thought hard about this. _Who can remember so easily everything that any one person had done for them? Well, I'll bet I can come close, so let's see—| _Images of times Ranma had played with the Young Feathers came to her mind. There were images that came to mind also of when Ranma would thank her for things she had done. The time he thanked her for her help in learning to control his wings. The time she woke up after Kuu's departure to find a tray of hot food on the floor next to the balcony with a note reading, 'hope you get feeling better. I miss her too' came to mind as well. Many images came to mind, and then one came that she did not recognize.

The image was blurry as if seen through squinted eyes, but the person had to be Ranma. It resembled him closely, but the situation wasn't one she knew. At least, not from any time she had been in Glie. _**"Please don't go, Nabiki-chan. I don't know what I'd do if you left me."**_ The memory shocked her system. _Was this a fragment of past again?_ She compared all of the memories against each other, analyzed them, and came to a solid conclusion. _Ranma cares for me like I was family. He might have before Glie too. Just what does he think about it?_

Nabiki nodded her head slowly. "He cares."

"There now, you look surprised. I won't say it was right of him to be so confrontational about it, but I think you both need to apologize to each other. He didn't deserve to be told that his feelings mean nothing to you. You didn't say it like that, I'm sure, but he probably took it that way. Love is strange that way." Haruka smiled again. Nabiki looked like she was about to deny that love was a part of this. It was so much fun to see love blooming where someone didn't think it was. It was annoying too, but the entertainment was worth it.

"I don't think love is in the picture, Haruka. Ranma doesn't think things through that much, and if he has I doubt that he feels that way. I don't have anything to offer him either, except maybe a few months to years before hell claims me or whatever is going to happen."

"I wouldn't think that way, Nabiki. If you can forgive me for pinning my prejudice on you then perhaps you can be forgiven for your own faults." Haruka waved her off. "See you later, Nabiki."

What Haruka meant by that statement and what Nabiki interpreted it to be were not the same. Haruka meant it to come across that Ranma would be okay with things that Nabiki considered faults of character. Nabiki heard it to mean that perhaps whatever caused her to be born Sinbound might be removed from her. It didn't help her much. There was no way it could happen, could it? As Nabiki was about to walk out the door, however, she bumped into someone coming in. It was Ranma again. _How did he know where I was?_

Some giggling was heard from behind her and Nabiki turned to see Haruka send a wink her way before ducking into the back room. _Oh great. Why me?_

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It didn't take long for Ranma to find the shop in question. The hardest part was asking for directions. He didn't actually know what the name of the shop was that Nabiki had been going to. All he had to go by was the name of the owner, and he figured that wouldn't be enough, so he started asking people by saying it was some clothes shop. There weren't many in Glie, and that he knew one shop that was NOT the one he wanted that helped to narrow it down. When a well dressed woman he was asking requested the name of the owner he discovered that the shop itself was called "Haruka's". _That figures.

I could have done this faster had I known, but oh well. I just hope she is still there._

Ranma was about to call out to the lady in the shop, Haruka he thought, as he entered the store when he bumped into someone and fell backward out the doorway, wings spread wide to give him an extra moment to land on his hands and butt instead of his back. He'd hate to think what would happen if he fell on his wings.

"Ouch. Sorry about that, miss." Ranma looked up to see Nabiki looking back at him. _I could have sworn I just saw her eyes as wide as plates. Trick of the light, maybe? Maybe she is still mad at me and didn't want to talk. Oh well, I need to do this._

Nabiki whipped her head to look behind her, but Ranma couldn't tell what she meant to look at. The shop was empty except for the two of them, and Ranma wasn't technically inside yet. _Wait, where did the other lady go? _"Um, uhâ€¦ can I talk to you, Nabiki?"

Nabiki swallowed audibly then took a breath and composed herself. Ranma smiled inwardly. _So cute... She wouldn't compose herself while facing anyone who had seen her this way before. She used to always turn away._ "I assume you know how, Ranma, so I don't see why not." Ranma grinned visibly.

"You know, you always try so hard to sound cold and like you don't care when you talk, but I know better, Ice Queen." Nabiki frowned. "Anyway, umâ€¦ I wanted to say that I, uhâ€¦ wellâ€¦ it's justâ€¦ last night and allâ€¦ umâ€¦"

"Spit it out, please?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you."

"I see your language lessons are going well, Ranma. Now please translate the sentence into our own language please."

Ranma blushed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry for yellin' at you last night. I was just so mad that you didn't tell me, cuz I thought we were friends and all. I know it's a bad excuse, but you are my friend and I worry about everyone I care about. I want everyone to know that they can talk to me about stuff that upsets them and stuff, you know? I'm sorry. If it really is none of my business, then I'll leave you alone."

Ranma turned to start down the street when Nabiki spoke up behind him.

"Ranma, I'm sorry too." Ranma turned back to face her and she stepped away from the doorway to let him in. He stepped inside gladly and closed the door. It was cold out there. "Don't tell anyone though. You know, I didn't really think that anyone really cared. You fit in with the rest of them so fast that I thought you were just upset that I wasn't fitting into your little world anymore. I thought you were getting upset with me because I wasn't willing to conform to telling you all my problems like I couldn't figure out how to solve them myself. So, I'm sorry too. I don't know what is going to happen to me when my time comes, but I don't want to be left alone to it. Reki has been a great help, but it will be good to feel like I have more people on my side."

"You don't have to think you have me on your side, Nabs." Nabiki gave a tiny smile at the use of what she now thought he used as a pet name. "You DO have me on your side. Don't think it, believe it." Ranma smiled to her. "Oh, and I have something for you." Ranma held out a fist and gently dropped the locket into her hand. Nabiki looked at it curiously.

"What is this for, Ranma?"

"It's a present. I thought, you know, since I was such a jerk last night that maybe I'd get you a gift to kinda make up for it, you know?"

Nabiki read the inscription on the back and laughed lightly. "Well, I guess it fits me, huh? What with the 'Ice Queen' you seem to think I am. I don't know if wrapping yourself up with someone like me will really keep you from 'going bad' though. You'll have to do that yourself." The two grinned at the joke. With that, Ranma took her hand and the two Haibane left Haruka's.

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The wind rushed through Kana's short hair as she zoomed along the road back to Old Home. The evening air was starting to reach snow temperatures and the clouds above promised the same. Rakka had gone into town earlier that day to get some winter clothes for herself but had been gone for so long that some of them were starting to worry. Reki was going to go into town to look, but since she was supposed to take care of the Young Feathers, Kana volunteered to go into town to look for her. _The real reason though was so I could ride her scooter. This thing is so much fun; I'm amazed Reki was able to get one. I wonder how she got it. _Lost in the euphoria of such speed Kana almost missed seeing two figures walking up the road ahead of her. Kana laughed inwardly. _Not hard to miss wings that size. He usually walks with them folded though. Rare to see him keep them spread out like that. I wonder if the one walking next to him is Rakka or Nabiki._

Kana slowed the scooter as she pulled up next to the pair. It was Nabiki he was walking with. The most noticeable thing though was they walked hand in hand. _This is new. Good to see they've made up. And I was right, so Hikari owes me two sweet buns!_

"Hey have you two seen Rakka or have you been too busy lost in each other's eyes all day?" The two quickly separated.

"Why are you looking for Rakka," Ranma asked. "Isn't she in Old Home?"

"No, she went into town to buy some warmer clothes by herself, and we haven't seen her since. I wasn't really worried, but they sent me to look for her in town and I couldn't find her. Have you seen her?"

Ranma looked questioningly at Nabiki who shook her head.

"No, we haven't seen her at all. Need us to help look?"

By the time they arrived in Old Home all three of them were getting worried. They hadn't seen Rakka in town or on the way home. When they entered the guest room Reki stood up quickly.

"Where's Rakka? Did you find her?"

Ranma shook his head. Hikari, whom was sitting in a chair at the table pondered aloud, wondering where Rakka had gone off to.

Kana cleared her throat. "You don't think maybe sheâ€¦"

"It's different from Kuu's time," Reki interrupted. "Rakka hasn'tâ€¦ugh."

Nemuu looked up at her and sighed. "None of us went with her into town. We may all have failed her."

"I'm sure it's not that bad," Nabiki said. "Rakka is a big girl and can take care of herself, right? As much of a hermit as she's been in the last few weeks, I doubt she is the kind of girl to have done something drastic."

"Well, it's not dark yet, but I don't want to wait until it gets too late and we all start to panic, so let's go look for her," Nemuu said standing up. A general murmur of agreement was made as they gathered their coats and went to search for their lost Feather. Ranma heard Nemuu say something about running away as he walked out the door. Whatever was wrong, he wasn't convinced that Rakka had just run away from them all. She didn't seem that kind of girl.

Reki took her scooter back and drove Hikari and Nemuu down a part of the road near the Western Woods. After telling them to search along the road heading north, Reki drove further until she reached the far end of it. She searched the areas along the road, driving south in sections and stopping for minutes at a time to look around each side of the road. She was starting to grow frantic when she found Rakka stepping out of the Western Woods, limping. Reki jumped off the still moving scooter and dashed toward her, calling her name.

Reki collided into Rakka and hugged her closely. "Rakka, you're okay!"

"Ouch," Rakka winced. "Reki, that hurts." Reki loosened her grip but didn't let go of her. "Sorry."

Reki pulled back and got a good look at her. "You're covered in mud. Where are your shoes; what happened?"

"I fell into the well in the Western Woods," Rakka replied calmly.

For a girl wearing a dress and no shoes she has got to be cold out here.

"Hey! Don't go off on your own like that, Reki!" "Oh good, you found her!" "Glad to see you safe!" Kana, Nemuu and Ranma all called out to them. They had caught up while Reki was searching up road.

"Hey, we're over here," Rakka called back, waving a cane in her hand that she hadn't had when she left Old Home that morning.

"That caneâ€|"

"The Communicator let me borrow it for a while. I know he seems mean, but he's really nice," Rakka said happily.

"If he was really nice, he wouldn't have left a girl in the woods all alone," Reki growled. She looked Rakka over and noticed many scratches, including her hands, as though she had been trying to dig stone up without tools. She reached out to take hold of them for a closer look. "Your hands are cold! This could mean that you are really sick; your hands are like ice!"

"That's strange," Rakka said bewildered. "I don't feel like anything's wrong. Hey, my ankle doesn't hurt anymore!"

"You haven't gotten any better, you've gone numb," Reki told her, now very alarmed. "Can you walk? While you were out there, did you touch the wall?" Rakka nodded, and Reki gasped.

"Hey, what's going on over here," Kana asked, walking up to them.

"Rakka touched the wall!"

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Author's Notes: Ew, cliffhanger. I hate those, but I had to end the chapter somewhere and as far as cliffhangers go this seemed like a good spot. I promise to try to get chapter 8 out soon! Love you all!

8. The Sinbound

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

"â€|"__**voices from past conversations echoing in your head**_

Thoughts

PRE-CHAPTER NOTE: After this Chapter many of the plot devices used are going to be of my own making with little to no guidance from the Canon of the story. This is because the insertion of Ranma and

Nabiki have caused enough changes to the Canon that people may act differently than before and because there is not a lot of Canon left to work with. No worries though. I will still do my best to produce the same quality that you all have come to expect. Without further ado, Chapter 8 has arrived!

****Haibane Ranma****

Feelings were thick with tension and worry as the group of Haibane rushed Rakka to the fallen scooter that Reki had abandoned when she found the young Haibane hobbling out of the Western Woods. Ranma worried that the emotions that were slowly consuming them might cause him to suffocate. He himself didn't understand the significance of a Haibane touching the wall, but judging by the reactions of the others this was a very dire problem. For himself, he did not want to see any of his sisters come to harm. After spending so many months with them Ranma had come to realize that that was exactly how he felt about the other Haibane in Old Home. They were all his siblings in their own way. Rakka was to him a little sister that needed to be protected more from the shadows while she was learning and trying her own strength and Ranma wanted to give her that opportunity. For now, however, she was in great need of help and he would do what he could to provide that help. If only he had a better idea of how to do it.

I'd carry her and run, but with the way my wings slow my fall because of their size I doubt I could outrun Reki's scooter when she floors it. Stupid wingsâ€¦| impressively big, but still not powerful enough to fly around with. They reached the scooter and Reki leapt into the seat and started it up. Ranma scooped Rakka up and set her on Reki's lap.

"Get going, Reki," Ranma told her. "We'll catch up at Old Home. You probably know best what needs to be done."

"Count on it," Reki said in a hurry. Flooring her scooter she zoomed off toward Old Home.

"We'd best get going too," Nemuu put in, worriedly. "Reki is probably going to need help taking care of her."

They all took off toward Old Home. Ranma, Nabiki and Kana took off running while Hikari and Nemuu rode the bicycle back. Ranma wanted to run faster so he could help Reki, but although Kana had the stamina and athleticism to go faster Nabiki was no runner. Ranma had seen Nabiki doing her own workouts. They were light and meant more to keep the figure she had (which he noted was very nice) but not geared to preparing her for heavy exertion. It proved true when after 5 minutes of what must have been a hard run for her Nabiki started breathing hard. Kana was not having as much difficulty, but Ranma was barely even winded. _I hope I don't get slapped for this._

With a squawk Nabiki was lifted off her feet by Ranma who immediately increased his pace to a much faster sprint. Cries from Kana about slowing down for her were almost lost to him due to the thumping on his chest by a much distraught Nabiki's fists. It wasn't completely lost; however, so he did slow his pace to Kana's fastest.

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"Ranma put me down! This is embarrassing!" Nabiki was absolutely mortified. Ranma, out of nowhere, had scooped her up and was sprinting while carrying her bridal style! Perhaps if no one else was there to see this it would not have been such an issue, but Kana, she noticed, could very clearly see the two of them. Inwardly she prayed that Kana would have mercy on her and not tease her for this as she was likely to do.

"No time, Nabs, we have to get there fast so we can help!"

Nabiki growled. _I know it's a pet name, but I think HE is the one who nabs the most_. "Fine, but you owe me BIG for this, and I WILL collect!" Nabiki settled in and tried to make herself comfortable.

When they arrived in Old Home Ranma put her down and then took off ahead of her. Kana was doubled over; gasping for air and Nabiki looked at her with a mixture of pity and concern. Shame the circumstances were not different, or Nabiki would have thought the extreme wheezing that barely passed for words funny. In the middle of the wheezing Kana pointed to the board that had their name plates and Nabiki understood what she was dying to say. She reached up and flipped over 'Ranma' 'Kana' and 'Nabiki' to the white side and noted that everyone else was here already.

"Come on, Kana. Let's get up to the guest room. It has the bed that Reki probably took Rakka to." She slung one of Kana's arms over her shoulders and started to help the exhausted girl to the building. "And if you don't tell anyone about Ranma carrying me, I won't start calling you 'Old Wheezer' from now on, deal?" Kana glared at her a moment then gave a nod as she continued to try catching her breath. _Saved!_

'Old Wheezer' finally spoke something coherent about halfway up the stairs to the second floor, where the guest room was located. "Howâ€| does that guyâ€| of yoursâ€| do it?" Kana coughed a little. Nabiki wasn't quite sure what to make of being seen as linked with Ranma in that way, but filed it away for later contemplation.

"I think it's all the exercise he gets in the morning. You've seen him jumping all over the place after he gets up. It's like he's got some hyperactive chipmunk inside him and he's trying to out-exert it." Nabiki looked at Kana who had started to laugh at the comparison. The laughter led to another coughing fit as she hadn't finished catching her breath. They both entered the guest room where the others were.

"Is she going to be okay, Reki," Ranma asked. _How dare he not be panting his lungs out after all that! I'd be worse off than Kana if not for being carried most of the way_. Nabiki blushed a little at the memory but forced it down as fast as she could. If anyone noticed they did not comment. Too much attention was focused on Rakka anyway.

"I don't know, Ranma. Haibane are forbidden to touch the wall, and those who do are punished. I'm going to need all of your help." Reki

looked toward Kana but as winded as she looked she gave her first task to Ranma. "Sorry, Ranma, but could you go to town and get some fever medicine?"

"Yeah, I can, but will they be open this late?"

"I don't know, but if not then make them open for you, and don't mention why you need it. Not about the walls or anything."

"Alright, I'll be back as fast as I can." Ranma made his way to the balcony door, opened it, and parachuted down to the courtyard where he could be heard to sprint away.

"That's odd, Reki," Kana started, having mostly caught her breath now. "You said she was cold earlier. Is she going to need fever medicine?"

"The fever won't start until after midnight. We should do our best to get her comfortable. There is an herb I can get for her from the Renmei, but if I am going to do that I'll need you all to take turns watching her. It is not going to be a good night for her as it is, but if I leave soon on the scooter then I should be back before it gets too late."

"How do you know all these things?!" Surprised faces turned to see Hikari giving Reki an upset look. "We know that you have a lot of secrets and we try to respect your privacy, Reki, but if you need our help so much we need to know what is going on!"

It was Nemuu who spoke up first, however. "Now is not the time, Hikari. We need to be sure we can keep Rakka okay. Yes, Reki knows about these things, but that is why for now we need to trust her to do what is best." Nemuu turned to Reki. "What do you need us to do?"

Reki looked at her gratefully. "I need a hot water bottle, some blankets and some cool cloths. You know... the usual. Take turns watching over her and make sure she's okay. When the fever starts apply the cloths. I should be back soon." As Reki started out the door an unexpected voice piped up.

"I'm going with you." It was Nabiki. Reki only turned to look at her for a second before nodding and the two left the room.

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"Would I be correct to believe you know these things because you have experienced them before, Reki? Nemuu doesn't seem surprised at all that you know." The wind whipping past them as they approached the cliffs near the Temple caused Nabiki to need to shout to be heard. "Care to let me in on this information?" Reki answered loudly to be heard without looking back.

"Yes, this is not the first time, but it is a bit of a touchy subject and I'd rather not talk about it right now. Nemuu hatched in Old Home not long before me, so she knows that I know more than most there."

Most of the other girls there have only shown up in the last four years or so, but the two of us have been Haibane in Old Home for a lot longer. I'll let you know more, but I'd rather stop now bec-
cough!"

I think she just swallowed a bug. My bad.

"I'll hold you to that," Nabiki replied into her ear.

They slowed to a stop after another few minutes at the point where the scooter could not safely traverse the cliffs paths and moved as quickly as they could to the temple entrance. The herbs apparently grew in the Temple Gardens, and as she remembered the Communicator did not think highly of open communication from the Haibane. _Stupid, that; he's called a communicator but doesn't like communication from us beyond a pair of bells._ Nabiki was about to ask how they were going to go about getting the message across to the Communicator that they needed the herbs Reki had mentioned on the way to the Temple. Before she could ask, though, Reki silently answered by ignoring the two robed men approaching with their sets of bells and burst into the front door. Nabiki had little choice but to follow the three of them. Reki was obviously very upset and looked to be about to make a scene. _Oh, Kami. I hope this doesn't blow up in our face._

They entered the Garden, Reki storming her way up to the Communicator and Nabiki hot on her heels. The Communicator turned slowly to face the two Haibane and the Temple Workers who were still attempting to fasten the bells onto their wings. As Nabiki was not nearly as upset and anxious, they had succeeded on her, but Reki would have none of it and continually shrugged them off. With a wave of his hand they stopped trying and stepped back.

"Leave us," the Communicator commanded them and they obeyed. For all her anger Reki waited for permission to speak. She was even more upset when the Communicator addressed Nabiki first and glared when she saw that Nabiki had allowed the bells to be placed upon her wings and wrists. The fact that Nabiki's hands were not held together in the 'appropriate' fashion but were instead resting on her hips was a mild satisfaction.

"Why have you two come here? Are you here about the Haibane Rakka?" Nabiki jingled her 'yes' wing and the Communicator turned to Reki. "You may speak."

"How could you do something so cruel? You knew she was going to get a fever from touching the wall!"

"Because you're in Old Home. I suspected that should something happen to her you would come here as you have before for Hyoko."

"We're not talking about Hyoko," Reki spat angrily. "You have to cure Rakka!"

_Who is Hyoko? _Nabiki held back her desire to interrupt the argument in hopes that she would learn a bit more about what was going on. Besides, she knew the saying. _Knowledge is power to those who know how to use it._ Reki continued.

"It's not like she was climbing the walls! Why do this to her?!"

The Communicator paused a moment before replying; the calmness never leaving his voice. The man irritated Nabiki at the same time she admired his ability to stay calm when confronted. "The walls are absolute. There is nothing within my power to do for her." As often is the case, the Communicator's calm demeanor spread out to both of them and Reki calmed enough to look thoughtfully dejected.

"The walls are supposed to protect good Haibane, aren't they? And Rakka isn't Sinbound anymore, is she?" Nabiki almost missed the slight crack in her voice.

"Even a good Haibane must be punished if she touches the wall. Rakka **did** overcome her ordeal. Howeverâ€¦"

The Communicator paused just for a breath but it was enough that Reki spoke, looking away for the first time since entering the Garden. "So it's trueâ€¦ she really did it."

"She had a bird help her, and there is no question that eventually she will find a way to break out of the Circle of Sin."

Nabiki was intrigued and had questions, but she remained silent still. It took all her willpower to keep that way though. Thoughts raced through her mind and she cursed herself that she became focused away from the conversation that she had missed some of it. _Probably the important stuff tooâ€¦_

"- therefore, she is no longer Sinbound." It was the Communicator. _What?! Is it really possible? Wait, since when was Rakka Sinbound? I've never seen any black at all on her wings._ Nabiki thought back to try to remember any clues that may have pointed it out to her. _Of courseâ€¦ Hikari had mentioned not long ago about Rakka's wings being frayed. That may have had something to do with it._ Nabiki looked back to her own raven feathers. They were neatly preened and had no sign of neglect at all. _Nothing to do with the Sinbound then. Maybe she was cutting the black spots out._ Her thoughts were interrupted by the Communicator.

"That is not for you to decide. You know what becomes of a Haibane whose time expires before she is ready to take the Flight." Nabiki cursed herself again for not focusing on the conversation. _I swear, what is wrong with me these days?_ Reki harrumphed but the Communicator plodded on. "You have no choice but to prevail against your own ordeal. As you well know, the Day of Flight comes equally to all good Haibane."

"What do you mean, 'equally'? Kuu was the youngest of us all! She spent so little time with us compared to most that if not for the memories we have that she was there it's almost as if she never was!" The Communicator raised his hand to interrupt but Reki charged on in anger. "I don't know how Rakka did it, but it is much more likely a sick twist of fate! Kuu was the luckiest among us to have had her Day of Flight as a good Haibane, but the truly Sinbound like Nabiki and I will never have one! There **IS** no 'equal' about that and there **IS** nothing fair about it at all! You can't justâ€¦" and before she completed her sentence, Reki turned and dashed out of the Garden and the Temple.

Nabiki was shocked. She hid it well, but she was truly at a loss. Which was true? Are the Sinbound doomed from the start because of

fate or some crime from a past they could not remember? She looked up at the Communicator and wanted more than anything to slap that mask off his face and see if the man ever felt anything. Goodness knew she was feeling much more than she ever wanted to. If she could be so coldâ€¦|

"Nabikiâ€¦|" the Communicator started. Nabiki wasn't sure she wanted to hear what he had to say. "I know you have some questions. You may speak freely if you desire." Nabiki thought for a moment. _It always comes back to this. No matter how hard I try to ignore it._

"Is there really no hope for the Sinbound?" Nabiki tried to keep the pleading sound from attaching itself to her own voice, but was only partially successful. "Is what Reki said true, that those born Sinbound can never have their Day of Flight?"

"Reki is upset. She has reason to be so as well. All Sinbound Haibane must overcome their ordeal in order to become Blessed once more, and never have I seen one who overcame without at one time feeling much the way Reki does. However, in answer to your question, there is hope for all Sinbound. I think that instead of hearing it from me you should go now and talk to Reki about it. I know you are an intelligent Haibane, and what she needs now is a friend. While I could provide all the answers she needs, it is not I that can touch her heart. The words I could give will not be heard from me in the way that will do the most good. Go now. You may find the herbs to help Rakka over there." The Communicator pointed off to his left and turned away, effectively dismissing her. Having his back turned on her Nabiki bowed politely, gathered some of the herbs, and made her way out of the Temple where she found Reki waiting silently near the waterfall.

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Kana was pacing anxiously beside the bed when Nabiki and Reki returned. The ride back home had been silent as Nabiki had been trying to piece together all of the bits of conversation she had been hearing. Trying to make sense of it all had been a slow process though and she had made little progress. Ranma, in girl form for some reason, was sitting on the table with her wings spread wide holding a steaming cup in her hands. The aroma suggested tea.

"You're finally back! I was getting worried. We got the fever medicine to her as soon as we could, but it's still been a few hours and her fever won't come down. I'd have gone to you earlier if you were here, but obviously we had to wait for you."

"Thanks, Kana," Reki said as she removed her coat and hung it up. "Has the medicine done nothing at all?"

"No. The guy at the shop was a little miffed at me for waking him up too, but I did what you said and ran as fast as I could," came the feminine voice of Ranma from the table. Taking a closer look Nabiki could see that her eyes were wet. _With tears? _Her clothes and hair were both obviously wind-blown and she looked very worried.

"Thanks both of you. I need to work on this medicine we got from the Renmei for her. I'm counting on you two. Nabiki, would you help me?"

Nabiki complied while she continued to consider thoughtfully the conversation between the Communicator and Reki not an hour past. Reki walked into the little side room to return a moment later with a pestle and grindstone. The two of them took turns grinding the herbs into small bits to be used in what Nabiki assumed would be some kind of medicinal tea. _Rakka won't like this. The smell itself is horrible._ Nabiki and Reki both opened their mouths to speak at the same time.

"Ranma, could you boil some water for us?" The two looked at each other a moment and smiled. The smiles turned to light laughter when while getting to her feet Ranma gave a weak smile and said 'in stereo'. She grabbed the kettle she had used for her tea and began to wash and prepare it for use.

"Hey Ranma," Nabiki asked, "why a girl right now?"

"Sympathy points from the guy with the fever medicine. Thought I'd get him to move faster if I looked like a cold, wet and desperate girl than if I just looked like a guy out of breath. It worked too."

"Okay, but you are still a girl. That doesn't bother you?"

"No. Girl or boy I am still myself, right?" Nabiki was amused by this. When they first arrived at Old Home it mattered greatly to Ranma that HE was a BOY all the time. She knew Ranma was getting more and more used to the switching as time went on, and she was glad he wasn't as worried about it. "Besides, is now the time to care about something I can change later? It's not like being a guy over being a girl is important right now." She gestured to the sleeping Rakka.

Nabiki was impressed. _Looks like his pride has gone down a few notches. That's good to see._ "Are you okay though, Ranma? You look like you've been crying."

"Eh? No, umâ€¦ it's the cold wind as I ran. It, uh, made my eyes water I guess." Ranma scratched the back of her head. _Liar_.

The door opened and Hikari stepped in followed by Nemuu.

"We're here to relieve you â€" oh, Reki we didn't know you two were back yet. What did the Renmei say," Hikari asked politely.

"We were given some herbs to help. Nabiki and I have it covered now though, so if you four don't mind?"

"Not at all," was Nemuu's reply.

The four others gathered themselves up and excused themselves from the room. Nabiki made her way to the kettle which was steaming but hadn't yet begun to whistle. She stood there silently listening to the sounds of the heating water and the grinding of herbs before she heard a rustling of bed sheets. Rakka was shifting about in her sleep. _There is nothing like a tragedy to make you think about stuff

you'd rather not think about._ The thoughts Nabiki had been entertaining all evening since this whole mess started had bounced around in her head and she wished them away, but the stubborn things just wouldn't go. _I have to get this out before it drives me insane._

"Hey, Reki," Nabiki started hesitantly. "Who is Hyoko?"

Reki sighed but answered her. "He is a boy from Abandoned Factory. A long time ago I ran away from Old Home and went there. After a time Hyoko and I went to the woods and he wanted to prove that the walls were not as dangerous as everyone had been telling us, so he tried to climb them. He didn't even get halfway when he fell from numbness. The walls are very cold to the touch if you are a Haibane. I don't know if the same is true for the townspeople. They don't touch the walls either, but they are not forbidden to. Hyoko started feeling odd after he got up and like Rakka developed a dangerous fever when midnight came."

There was a pause before Nabiki pressed on. "What did the Communicator mean by 'Rakka's ordeal'? I think I know but I know you do."

Reki did not answer immediately. Nabiki could tell she was not sure she wanted to answer her. Time won out and she did reply after a few minutes of quiet grinding.

"According to the Renmei, a Sinbound Haibane must overcome some trial or ordeal that is causing them to be Sinbound. The Communicator once gave me a riddle. He called it the Circle of Sin. According to the riddle, 'To recognize one's Sin is to have no Sin'. It makes very little sense to me because that sounds like lying to yourself. I don't know how Rakka was able to overcome her 'ordeal', let alone what it was. The only thing I know is that a bird was involved, and it 'forgave' her. I wish I knew more."

"So then is it true? Can the Sinbound be saved?" Nabiki almost choked on the words. Reki wasn't doing much better. Emotion was creeping into her own voice.

"It seems that way. I struggle trying to believe in it though." Reki's voice cracked. "I have been trying so hard for so long to understand that riddle so that there can be hope for me, Nabiki." All of the pressure, worry and reminders about her fate should she fail came crashing down upon Reki after the added weight of Nabiki's concern, and the rest of Reki's words were said through wracked sobs and many tears. "But after everything that has happened I don't feel like I have much hope left! You were there when the Communicator told me how little time I have left! I don't know what to do anymore! I do my best to keep a strong face on everything even though I've been surrounded by the Blessed Haibane for nearly my entire stay here, knowing that everyone around me would have their own Day of Flight and leave me behind! When you came along and when Rakka became Sinbound I began to feel like maybe the final stretch of my time here would not be time where I continued to feel alone, but then Rakka overcame it and is leaving me behind again! Everyone I've known among the Haibane has left me behind and I don't know as though I'll ever find my way out! I'm scared, Nabiki! I am completely terrified of what is going to happen to me. I spend so much time in my room trying to recreate what I can remember of my Cocoon Dream, hoping that it

will help me know what I need to do but I still feel like I haven't learned anything! I just wantâ€¦ I justâ€¦" and the rest of her words were lost to the sobs of a tormented soul. Nabiki's own emotions had been building up listening to Reki pour her heart out to her. She knew how Reki felt, at least to a strong degree. Many of these were the same or similar to feelings she herself had been keeping hidden within herself. As Reki's outpouring became more and more emotional, the same feelings made themselves stronger and stronger in her own heart until finally, as Reki was losing her ability to communicate any other way, both girls collapsed on each other and cried their hearts out together. Their only current comfort in knowing that the other knew intimately how they felt.

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It was minutes after they calmed down that they finished the preparation of the herbal tea for Rakka and took it to her. As Nabiki suspected it would, the smell woke the girl up.

"Here," Reki said gently. "Take this, it will help." Rakka sat up slowly and took a sip. Nabiki was glad they got it to her as fast as they did or Rakka might have been too weak to sit up or do much else.

"It's bitter." Reki and Nabiki smiled weakly.

"It's supposed to be bitter," Nabiki started, "that's what makes the nasty stuff medicine, right?"

The three of them laughed and then were silent for a little while as Rakka slowly downed the whole cup. Upon finishing Rakka began to speak.

"What's wrong you two? You look like you've been crying. I'm really okay. I feel better already."

"Rakka, can we talk to you?" Reki hissed to Nabiki but she held up a hand to forestall her. Rakka giggled a little in reply.

"Of course you can. You're already doing it."

"Yeah. Well, we were wondering if you could help us out with something. The Communicator told you something about the Circle of Sin, right?" Rakka became very nervous but Nabiki finished up. "Can you explain it to me?"

"Well," Rakka shifted anxiously in the sheets. "What I understood out of it was that if I recognize what my Sin was then I am no longer a sinner. At the same time though, if I don't believe I have done anything wrong then I AM a sinner. The Communicator talked to me while I was still in the forest and I think that it is important to know what the Sin was and then to know that everything is okay now. I believe that the bird was someone I knew before and that the bird forgave me because I was always feeling like I was alone and that my life didn't matter to anyone. I think that was my Sin in a way. I felt horrible that my feelings caused pain to others. I feel better

now though. Why do you ask?"

"So what you are saying," Nabiki verified, "is that the Sinbound have to first know what their Sin is, then find a way to make it all better?" Reki looked with wide-eyed amazement at Nabiki.

"I think so. That's what I did."

"The Communicator said that the bird forgave you," Reki said carefully. "So the Sinbound must find some kind of forgiveness then?" Reki lowered her head. "I'm screwed. I don't have a bird or anything like that to help me through my own problem."

"That's not true, Reki. You have me! I don't know how much good I can do, but I will do whatever I can. I want all of my friends to be together." Rakka was concerned for her senior.

"You have me too, Reki. And I have the two of you, and we all have the whole of Old Home to help us if we ask. I know Ranma will want to help for what it is worth, and I'll bet Nemuu will too. You and her seem to be good friends."

"What about Haruka," Reki asked. "She knows you pretty well, Nabiki. Maybe she can help?" Nabiki thought about this.

"She does have a very critical eye, so maybe she can help us to know what our faults are. That might point us in the right direction. I'm not sure how well she can help though, but it is worth a try."

The three of them planned out what they were going to do. All the pounding stress and worry of only minutes ago felt as though it had been gently washed away as the three friends bonded closer than ever before, all united with a goal to keep them together and their friendship strong even beyond the wall.

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Author's Notes: That took a bit longer than expected. I hope everyone likes it though! It didn't turn out quite the way I planned it in my outline, but stories do that to us lowly authors on occasion. It's shorter than all the others too I think... Oh well, it was a good place to stop. It's been an amazing few weeks though. I'll just take a moment more of your time though. I apologize to anyone who may be thinking, "Where did the comedy part go? Why so much drama all of a sudden?" Well, believe me when I say it was not my original intention, but it was needed at this point. The heaviest drama is still to come, but that won't be until AFTER the girls are confronting their own sin. Reki's will be heavy; at least, much like the Anime's version as that itself hasn't changed. Finally, I have news that I hope everyone will take joy in! Chapter 9 is going to be the long awaited chapter where we will finally learn Nabiki's Cocoon Dream! Look forward to it and keep those reviews coming! It's only fair that if you can bug me for updates I can bug you for reviews.

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9. What Dreams Reveal: Pt 3

Disclaimer: All characters depicted in this fan fiction are the property of their respective creators, Rumiko Takahashi, the creator of Ranma 1/2, and Yoshitoshi ABe, of the crew for Haibane Renmei. These are used without permission and the story written here is for the enjoyment of all, and not to be used for obtaining monetary gain or other illegal uses. I hope it is enjoyed, and please do not try to sue me. I have to write this at a public computer anyway.

"..." speech

"â€|" _**voices from past conversations echoing in your head**_

Thoughts

Haibane Ranma

Nabiki was thoroughly enjoying herself. She remembered having been told once that if in dreaming you realized it was a dream then the dream was yours to control. She loved being in control of dreams. She no longer had wings of any kind at all, but was dreaming herself into a life unlike any she could remember, but a life like she wished she was living. She was surrounded by possessions and people who adored her and served her every whim. It was a life of luxury where everything was well made and of the finest materials. Nabiki was in her own personal heaven.

Suddenly her dream shifted. This was certainly not the kind of dream she wanted. It was not a bad dream, like a nightmare, but all the nice things were gone and she was alone. She stood quietly still in a marsh near a rolling plain. Cattails grew all around her and a wind started to blow, bending them. Nabiki looked up to the sky to see the moon out in full. The darkness around was oppressive, as though nothing existed further than the small area she could see, but what she could see was perfectly clear to her.

The wind picked up and the cattails continued to bend to them. Nabiki herself felt the wind push her lightly as if beckoning her to bend as well. She tried to shift her feet so that she would not bend but found them too deeply mired to move. This caused her a slight alarm. Were her feet so deep a moment ago? The wind rose once more. It was reaching speeds one expected when they knew a storm was coming. The cattails bent further, allowing the wind to do with as it pleased. The cattails had no choice but to bend.

Nabiki struggled further. The marsh had taken her up to her knees and she began to lose hope that she'd be able to free herself. She started to mutter pleas of help quietly; not really wanting just yet to admit that she really needed it. The force of the wind continued to rise and Nabiki felt herself bending too in spite of her efforts to remain erect. _This is not fair! This is my dream, why can't I control it!_ The marsh had her up to her waist now. It showed no signs of stopping! Would the marsh take the whole of her? It was up to her bust; her neck, her jaw. Nabiki shrieked in true terror and all around her the cattails bowed abeyance to the winds manipulation of their position.

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Nabiki woke with a start, bolting up partway in bed before the tangle of sheets had their way and she fell to the floor. She was panting heavily. There was no one here to see her and she was certain her face still held the terror she had felt moments ago. Nabiki took some long, deep breathes to calm herself. _It was only a dream; just a dream. _It felt so real though; the kind of feeling you get when you've experienced it before. Nabiki sat there for several minutes, committing the sweet dreams to memory. That ending nightmare she didn't need to commit to. She doubted she'd ever forget something that terrifying.

Nabiki looked around and noticed the early morning light barely causing any true illumination for her room yet. By the lack of light Nabiki figured that most of Old Home wouldn't be up yet. She untangled herself from the sheets and stood up off the floor, stretching languidly. After a quick dressing and grooming her feathers, hair and face, Nabiki strode out of her room. Her intended destination was Reki's room.

Upon arriving she rapped the door lightly. She had learned from Rakka a while back that Reki was a light sleeper and any really loud noise when she was sleeping caused her heart to race. _I need to talk with her about this while she is pleasant, not irritated with me._ Nabiki pressed an ear to the door and could hear the rustling of cloth. _Good. She's up._

"If someone isn't dead, they are about to be," Reki groaned through the door. She opened it slowly and peeked out through the crack. "Nabiki? What has you up so early? The sun isn't even above the horizon yet."

"I had a dream," Nabiki whispered, "or a nightmare, I'm not sure which. It seemed like a nightmare to me at least. Can I come in?" Reki opened the door more fully and allowed her to enter.

"Go ahead and have a seat on the bed. I'll take the chair." Nabiki did so and sat on the bottom bunk of Reki's bed. "Okay, go ahead and tell me about your 'dreammare' or whatever. But if this is something stupid I'm kicking you out so I can go back to bed, okay?"

"Fair deal," Nabiki complied. She proceeded to tell Reki all about the marsh and the darkness. She gave particular details to the cattails and how she kept sinking into the muck until it had her nearly covered. Reki was a very good listener and prodded her for more details.

"So the marsh just kept pulling you down deeper and deeper?"

"That's what I've been saying, yes. What do you think of all this? I want to just say it's a typical nightmare, but as vivid as it was? I'm not so sure. And you know I hate being uncertain about anything."

Reki thought about this. It looked to Nabiki as though Reki were debating with herself about something. Nabiki waited patiently to find out what it was and wasn't disappointed.

"Come with me, I want to show you something."

Reki opened a door too the side that Nabiki hadn't noticed was there. There had been a canvas set up in front of it of a Haibane with glasses that reminded her both of Nemu and Hikari. When Reki held the door for her she nodded and entered the dark room.

The room was almost pitch black. Reki entered behind her holding a low burning candle on a holder. Silently, Reki walked into the middle of the room and set the candle upon the floor. Soft light illuminated the walls and ceiling dimly. Nabiki could see no furniture of any kind in the room. It didn't really feel much like a room though. All the walls, ceiling and floor looked strange. Nabiki looked a little closer and realized that every surface of the room had been painted to create the feel of being somewhere else. Nabiki walked around in silence, examining it all.

"Wow, Reki. You are very good. It's almost like I'm not even in Old Home, but wherever this is instead." Reki nodded and shifted the candle off center about a foot.

"Come stand in the middle here, Nabiki. I want you to really feel it." Reki stepped back into a shadowy corner and Nabiki took her place in the room's center. She looked curiously toward where Reki stood. "Now close your eyes and imagine your dream for a moment." Nabiki closed her eyes.

The marsh had taken her up to her knees and she began to lose hope that she'd be able to free herself. She started to mutter pleas of help quietly; not really wanting just yet to admit that she really needed it. The force of the wind continued to rise and Nabiki felt herself bending too in spite of her efforts to remain erect.

Nabiki could feel herself falling over and opened her eyes just as she landed on the cold hard floor. She rubbed her backside and muttered a complaint under her breath. Reki walked up to her and crouched down.

"Could you feel your dream again?"

"It was like I was having it again. Reki, what is this room?"

Reki looked around stoically. "This is my memory room. There isn't really anything magical about it or anything, but I have worked hard on this room, trying to recreate my own Cocoon Dream here. What you see here is as much as I can remember, but it isn't enough. Something is missing and I haven't figured it out. I'm not sure, but I feel like if I could just remember it, then I might be able to find some kind of peace for myself." Reki paused, "or maybe redemption."

Nabiki stood up, picked up the candle and turned to Reki. "Let's go back to your room. I don't want to stay in here." She didn't say that after having the flashback of her nightmare that she was afraid to stay in there. After being with the Haibane for as long as she had she really wanted everyone to think she had gotten used to everything. Jumping at sounds and being overly cautious around darker areas wouldn't allow her that comfort.

As they entered Reki's room they couldn't help but notice Nemu frozen

with her hand reaching out as if she had been about to open the door to the 'memory room' herself. She looked frazzled and a little worried, which was not a normal look for her as her expressions usually were very subtle.

"Oh I forgot," Reki said quietly. "Nemu's room is just below that one."

Nemu slowly dropped her hand. "What happened you two?"

"Reki was showing me something and I fell down," Nabiki said smoothly. She wasn't sure if Nemu knew what was in that room or not, but if she knew then she should be able to easily guess why.

"I was helping Nabiki here try to remember her Cocoon Dream. I think it worked."

Nemu's eyes didn't go wide. She didn't gasp. She instead looked at Nabiki questioningly. "So, what was it?"

Nabiki jerked toward Reki ready to argue that nightmare couldn't have been her Cocoon Dream when the door to the hallway opened again letting Rakka in. Everyone turned to her.

"Umâ€¦ I came to let you know that breakfast is almost ready. I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything. What about Nabiki's Cocoon Dream?" Rakka looked both excited and ashamed at the same time. It was almost comical and Nabiki might have laughed if not for the fact her private dreams were the topic. Palm to face she looked back at Reki who's face seemed to say 'go ahead and tell her'.

"It wasn't my Cocoon Dream," Nabiki spat bitterly. She calmed her features while the other girls just stared at her. "It couldn't have been," she muttered calmly.

"I think it was, Nabiki," Reki contradicted. "Sinbound like us do not get to have a sweet Dream in our cocoons. Our Dreams are more nightmares than anything else. All I really remember of mine was what you saw. I know there was more, but I can't remember it all. Those are the natures of our Dreams. I really think this was yours."

"If you don't mind, can I hear what your Dream was, Nabiki?"

"I would like to hear it as well," Nemu followed Rakka's desire.

Nabiki was sure if it was just Nemu she wouldn't have bothered, but Rakka was in on their plans to find a way to save the Sinbound. It would hardly be helpful to that plan if she refused to share the information. She gave a little sigh and began retelling her Dream to them. Halfway through it Reki smiled oddly, and when the telling was finished Nabiki demanded to know what it was for before the questions about her Dream could start.

"Oh I just realized that Ranma was right after all."

Nemu looked questioningly at Reki and asked, "Right about what?"

"Nabikiâ€¦" Reki left hanging in the air. There was a pause and then

Nemu smiled as well and even gave a little laugh.

"Okay, what's the joke about me now?" Rakka nodded her head. She wanted to hear what this was about as well. It was Nemu that supplied the answer.

"Nabiki means 'bending'. In your Dream the cattails were bending. Ranma got your name right when we first met you two. It's just funny that the coincidence is there. I'm glad to have a reason to tell the Young Feathers now. They've been bugging me for months to change the tradition on naming New Feathers. You've been their excuse, saying that someone else just picked a name for you.

"Oh I'm so glad to no longer be a bother to you, Nemu," Nabiki said sarcastically. Nemu suddenly looked very serious.

"You've never been a bother to me, Nabiki. I want to help anywhere I can. You three are planning something and I want to know what. Maybe I can help."

This was a surprise to two of the girls. Rakka didn't seem to be affected by the admission at all. There was a pregnant pause while Nabiki and Reki thought this through. _Nemu works at the library. Having her help would give us access to a wealth of information there, if any information exists. Nemu would know if there _was_ anything too. Perhaps it would be best to have another person in our little group._ Finally Nabiki and Reki nodded to each other. Rakka smiled, and the three of them outlined the plan to Nemu.

On the way to breakfast the four ran into Kana who informed them that Rakka had a summons to the Temple today.

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Ranma sat at the breakfast table alone with a very nice spread in front of him, looking like he could chew nails. _I sent Rakka to get everyone, where are they?_

* * *

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Author's Notes: Hey, sorry both for the long delay and the short chapter. It took me a long time to come up with this one and to be honest I'm not all that satisfied with it. I may redo it later but I wanted you to see how it means to go. I usually put three main events in each chapter in the Haibane Renmei tradition, but I just couldn't find the way at this time, so its a short chapter this time. As I said, I will probably revise it later. As for the delay in posting, I lay partial blame to getting a gf for a while. Life happens.

End
file.